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DAVID MASTERS, (BA Hons).

***CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY -
BRITISH ART 1930-1990.***

A thesis offered for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
pertaining to the discipline of Art History.

Submitted in February 1996.

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Abstract.

to accompany the thesis:

CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY - BRITISH ART, 1930-1990.

Claims for the 'Englishness' or 'Britishness' of art are often attended by a confident appeal to the 'obvious' innateness of certain characteristics - such as individualism, an amateur impulse, or a tendency for figurative work. In some cases claims are made that these, and other 'national' traits, are an embodiment of 'civilized values'. One of the objects of the present study will be to identify and examine some of these key characteristics. This will involve an enquiry into the relationship of art to other areas of social life at different historical conjunctures.

Three periods have been chosen for particular consideration: 1930-1939; the mid-40s to mid-50s; and the 1980s. In each of the three periods attention will be focussed on a range of art practices, theories, and sites of production and distribution. This will involve, in some places 'case studies' of books, journals and exhibitions which seem to bring some of the issues into sharp focus.

Key subjects will include not only the issue of what is 'British' but what is 'un-British'. 'Figuration', 'the landscape', 'abstraction', and 'internationalism' emerge as some of the principal concepts fought over by those who attempt to assert or contest what is essentially 'British'. A further object of enquiry will be the claims made by some 'critical' modern artists and critics that invocations of 'Britishness' reveal a tendency in this country towards parochialism.

The thesis will conclude by observing an interesting development in Britain during the eighties. While some have pronounced modernism dead, others have continued to believe that some of the fundamental ideals and values of modernism remain substantial. Modernism, the latter would claim, continues for the foreseeable future to provide the necessary resources to maintain a critical practice which can resist the more parochial tendencies of 'British' art.

David Masters.

CHAPTER 1

----- Introduction.

One thing in common between Herbert Read, Nikolaus Pevsner and Peter Fuller, writing respectively in the nineteen thirties, fifties and eighties, is that each of them attempted to define the character of 'English' or 'British' art.¹ These, and many other similar attempts to identify the 'national character' of art form the principal concern of this study.

Claims for the 'Englishness' or 'Britishness' of art are often attended by a confident appeal to the 'obvious' innateness of certain characteristics. These have variously included individualism, an amateur impulse, and a tendency for figurative work. In some cases claims are made that these, and other 'national' characteristics, embody 'civilized values' and enable the British to show cultural leadership in the world. Peter Fuller, writing in the eighties, provides a vivid example:

By being true to their native traditions, British artists may be able to make a unique contribution to the new, emerging 'structure of feeling', which would appear to be essential for the survival of the world, as a whole.²

One of the objects of this study will be to identify and examine some of the key characteristics claimed as exemplary for 'British' art. It is anticipated that an enquiry of this sort will need to look beyond the narrow sphere of art. If, for example, an examination is made of the claim that the exemplary 'British' artist is motivated by an 'amateur impulse', it will also be necessary to ask whether the claimant is representative of a broader constituency with whom he or she shares the same core of values and concerns. Clearly if questions such as this are to be addressed, then this enquiry will need to take into account the relationship of art to other areas of social life at different historical conjunctures.

In order to observe claims for 'British' art which may change or persist over time, a period between 1930-1990 has been selected for this study. It is not intended, however, that this should result in a straightforward chronological account which surveys, with equal attention, the whole sixty years. Three periods have been chosen for particular consideration: 1930-1939; the mid-40s to mid-50s; and the 1980s. The intervening years will be considered briefly to acknowledge important changes and developments. The selection of these three periods stems from an initial observation that at these times there was a coincidence between a

heightened interest in cosmopolitan modernism, and an intensification of debates over national identity. One of the primary tasks of this study will be to enquire into this coincidence.

An interest in cosmopolitan modernism in this country has taken different forms. One of the forms traced in this project is abstract art. Two contrasting positions can be characterised with regard to the pursuit of abstraction. Firstly, in each of these three periods the practice of abstract art was typically justified as a means of maintaining art's autonomy. Why the independence of art should be seen as desirable is itself a complicated issue, but one key factor was an opposition to parochialism. In this sense, to engage with 'the modern' was seen as a means of resisting the narrowly 'British'. Secondly, and, as it were, from the other side, the practice of abstract art was cited as evidence that national identity was being eroded by 'foreign' ideas. This suggests that abstract art could also be characterised, in the pejorative sense, as 'un-British'. What emerges from this is the importance of the pairing 'British' and 'un-British' and the different valuations placed on 'the modern', and 'abstract' when used to define these categories.

In each of the three periods attention will be focussed on a range of art practices, theories, and sites of production and distribution. This will involve case studies of books, journals and exhibitions which seem to bring some of the issues into sharp focus. For the practical reason of delimiting an otherwise endless range of material, this study deliberately attends to what is generally regarded as 'high-art', and to artists and writers who are generally associated with 'high-art'. One further reason, though, is that debates over the 'British' and the 'modern' are often at their most trenchant in the context of 'high-art'. This may suggest that it is on such cultural 'high' ground that protagonists consider it both worthwhile and necessary to fight out their ideological battles. There is clearly another study to be undertaken which traces the same controversies through a range of different media and cultural practices. A study of the latter kind may shed new light on some of the conclusions drawn from this present study, but it is to be anticipated that the findings would be broadly complementary regarding the character of cultural nationalism.

One issue to flag at the outset is the problem of using the terms 'Englishness' and 'Britishness'. This problem is exacerbated by the frequent inconsistency of usage by artists and writers themselves. Herbert Read, one of the central figures in this study, exemplifies this problem in his book, *Contemporary British Art*, published in 1951. In the introductory essay stating his intentions he writes:

... I have tried to make some comparisons between the formal aspects of modern English art and the art of certain past phases

of English art. It is only in this sense that one speaks of a 'revival' of art, or of Great Britain 'making a definite contribution to the cultural revival of Western Europe'.³

What this quotation demonstrates is a confusion created by the poor fit between the title of the book and the fact that Read refers exclusively to *English* art and artists throughout his essay. The implication which can be drawn from this is that there is an underlying assumption made by some English artists and writers, rarely made explicit, that the primary characteristics of 'Britishness' reside in English culture and history, rather than in Scottish, Welsh or Irish culture and history. Neither is this merely an historical problem. It is not unusual for recent accounts of 'Britishness' to ignore or marginalize work undertaken by artists of British nationality descended from other ethnic traditions, principally Afro-Caribbean and Asian. The hegemony of the 'English' is always maintained at the expense of some 'other'.

There is evidence that during the eighties, the dominant view which equated 'Britishness' with 'Englishness' was increasingly being challenged. For example, in Scotland there were new developments in figurative painting which self-consciously addressed the country's social and political identity.⁴ Similar developments had been noted in Irish art during this period. Brian McAvera has suggested that in the eighties, for the first time in several centuries, Irish artists were beginning to represent the reality of living in a strife-ridden country.⁵ For many centuries, it would seem, Scotland, Ireland and Wales have been represented to the English, and to themselves, as countries important to 'Britishness' for their contribution to the past, but not in relation to any sense of 'modern' British identity. Terence Brown has claimed that, in Ireland, the State has encouraged a 'cultural life ... dominated by a vision of Ireland inherited from the period of the Literary Revival, as a rural and Gaelic civilization that retained an ancient pastoral distinctiveness'.⁶

There is the need for a project which examines the changing identity of the Irish, Welsh and Scottish in relation to 'Britishness'; a project which identifies their national art of the past, and the present, and considers how dominant myths of national identity are sustained and can be challenged. However, despite the evidence which suggests that concepts of 'Britishness' and national identity were being contested in the eighties, a form of hegemonic 'Englishness' remains dominant. It is the aim of the present study to examine this continuing domination. While, in the eighties, for example, the upsurge of interest in an Irish or Scottish national art could have provided a different focus, I have, instead, chosen to examine the re-assertion of a form of 'Britishness' predicated

on a conservative sense of 'Englishness'. This is exemplified by Peter Fuller in his journal *Modern Painters*.

One further issue arising from this study is the absence of any sustained effort to address the marginalization of women in all spheres of high-art - for example, as curators, historians and critics, as well as practising artists. In defence of this omission, it is suggested that discussions surrounding art between the thirties and fifties rarely made this an explicit issue. This is not to say that it was not an issue: indeed, the very lack of any overt recognition of the question may be taken as evidence of a prevalent and unquestioning patriarchy. However, this study does not aim to redress the balance, but rather to characterize the overt concerns of a critical discourse. Generally speaking, there was a more self-conscious address to gender issues in the sixties and seventies. In 1978, for example, a decision was made which allowed the selection of *The Hayward Annual* exhibition to be made by five women. An interesting, if unexpected twist to this event was the observation made at the time by Rasheed Araeen, a Pakistani artist working in Britain. He noted that despite this positive move in favour of women, the women themselves had failed to select any non-European, non-white artists. He subsequently staged a protest.⁷ This example alone demonstrates the complex issues attending matters of gender and race, and points to a substantial area of enquiry beyond the scope of this present study, but impinging upon it nonetheless.

One final issue should be raised here. This concerns the way that a cluster of key terms - 'conservative', 'liberal', 'hegemony' and 'ideology' - have been employed throughout this study. It will be sufficient at this stage to outline, in turn, their relevance in the present context.

It was apparent throughout this research that those who emphasised values such as 'tradition', 'heritage' and 'authority' could appropriately be described as 'conservative'. However, it was not necessarily a strictly political conservatism that was being observed in such cases. What was of particular interest for this study was the way that the relevant values were articulated over *cultural* issues. Consequently, the term '*cultural conservatism*' is perhaps more accurate because it refers to the holding of values that are not necessarily confined to the political Right. Indeed, what has been observed in the present research is a persistent 'cultural conservatism' that ranges across the political spectrum.

The second term deserving mention here is 'liberal'. Again, it has been more useful to regard this term outside its strict party-political connections. It is, as Stuart Hall suggests, a term that can be used to describe a particular cluster of

values: 'Liberals are open-minded, tolerant, rational, freedom-loving people, sceptical of the claims of tradition and established authority, but strongly committed to the values of liberty, competition and individual freedom'.⁸ Hall also suggests, however, that liberalism constitutes a core of values which are continually contested: 'liberalism is a diverse, not a unified, discourse and consequently ... (has) ... radical, conservative and "social democratic" strands'.⁹ One of the aims of this study will be to reach a clearer understanding of the way that these liberal values have typically been articulated in relation to 'British' art.

The final two terms - 'ideology' and 'hegemony' - are connected, both to each other and to the previous two terms. It was suggested above that 'liberal' values are not 'fixed' but fought over and contested. Again, Hall proposes a cogent thesis for making sense of this ongoing, dynamic process. This helps to locate the struggle taking place in the cultural sphere within a broader social context. He defines 'ideology' as:

the whole range of concepts, ideas and images which provide the frameworks of interpretation and meaning for social and political thought in society, whether they exist at the high, systematic, philosophical level or at the level of casual, everyday, contradictory, common-sense explanations.¹⁰

Drawing on this general definition, Hall suggests a 'discursive conception of ideology' and contends that the ideological sign 'can be discursively rearticulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently'.¹¹ Hall goes on to quote the Italian marxist, Antonio Gramsci who questions: 'How these currents are born, how they are diffused and why in the process of diffusion they fracture along certain lines and in certain directions'.¹² This raises a pertinent issue for the present study concerning the relationship between the production of art and the wider social context.

The last of the terms I want to consider here is 'hegemony'. Again, its present use is rooted in the theories of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci suggested that societies generally maintain cohesiveness, not by the overt coercion of subordinate groups but through a 'fundamental group' asserting moral and intellectual leadership.¹³ 'Hegemony' defines a 'compromise equilibrium' that is achieved by subordinate groups consenting to the values, ideals and beliefs of this dominant group. This consent, Gramsci maintains, is constantly being negotiated, it is never fixed. Moreover, and of particular relevance to this study, Gramsci considered culture to be one of the important sites for this contest.

Gramsci's understanding of 'hegemony' serves to explain something of the dynamic relationships at work in society, and the way in which 'ideology', as defined above, functions. It also helps to explain why terms such as 'conservative' and 'liberal' are best seen as mutable categories, subject to change. In connection with this, the terms 'Left' and 'Right' are used throughout the text as markers of two, antithetical political tendencies. However, one of the lessons of this study is that the dividing line between the two terms is not fixed - as, for example, when an artistic radical turns out to be a political conservative, or vice versa. Just as with the terms 'conservative' and 'liberal', so too 'Left' and 'Right' are mutable categories connected to explicit political divisions, but requiring careful mapping and constant revision in respect of any given cultural context or issue.

This discussion of the four terms 'conservative', 'liberal', 'ideology' and 'hegemony' has several implications for the present study. Firstly, it draws attention to the status of art as an important site of ideological struggle, where the social contest over values and ideals can be seen to take place. Secondly, it serves to emphasise the way that any understanding of art has also to take into account the dynamic relationship between culture and other aspects of social life. And lastly, it would indicate that if something of this dynamic relationship is to be understood, it is necessary to examine those values and ideals which are being constantly negotiated and contested within the sphere of art.

This study of a sixty year period will seek to address the variety of issues raised above, many of which focus on the tension involved in reconciling the 'modern' and the 'British'. However, a study of national art history also has to take into account the international developments which have affected art and culture during the same period. One of the most important developments since the late-nineteen fifties has been the growing challenge to the tenets of high-Modernism, which some have identified with postmodernism.

The issue of 'Britishness' in the recent past is bound up with these shifting attitudes to modernism and postmodernism. At the close of the period under research it seemed that many artists and writers were claiming that the 'excesses' of modernism could be addressed by a return to 'national' concerns. Yet while some have pronounced modernism dead, others have continued to believe that some of the fundamental ideals and values of modernism remain of continuing relevance. Modernism, the latter would claim, continues for the foreseeable future to provide the necessary resources to maintain a critical practice which can resist the more parochial tendencies of 'British' art.

REFERENCES

- 1 See Read's essay 'English Art', first published in *The Burlington Magazine*, 1933, reprinted in Read's *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, (London, 1964), pp249-268. Pevsner's book *The Englishness of English Art* was published in 1956. Fuller's claims for 'Britishness' found a particular platform in his journal *Modern Painters*, launched in Spring 1988.

- 2 Peter Fuller, 'Against Internationalism', *Art Monthly*, number 100, (October 1986), pp12-14, p14.

- 3 Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art*, (Penguin, 1951), p38.

- 4 See, for example, Angus Calder, *Revolving Culture - notes from the Scottish Republic*, (London, 1994). In chapter 25, 'Art for a New Scotland?', pp243-257, he discusses the work in the eighties of the 'Glasgow School' artists, such as Ken Currie, Steven Campbell, Stephen Conroy and Adrian Wizniewski.

- 5 Brian McAvera, 'Art, Politics, and the Irish', *Art Monthly*, number 120, (October 1988), pp7-10.

- 6 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1979*, (London, 1981), p98.

- 7 From a transcript of a conversation with Rasheed Araeen, 4 February, 1995, Appendix 7, p343.

- 8 Stuart Hall, 'Variants of Liberalism', from *Politics and Ideology* - edited by James McDonald and Stuart Hall, (Open University Press, 1986), pp34-69, p34.

- 9 Ibid., p37.

- 10 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal - Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, (London, 1988), p9.

- 11 Stuart Hall, 'Variants of Liberalism', op cit., p34.

- 12 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, op cit., p9.

- 13 This is proposed by Antonio Gramsci, in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, (London, 1971).

CHAPTER 2

Facing up to 'the modern' in Britain during the thirties.

Retrospective accounts of modern British art during the early nineteen thirties characterise it as a time when some artists were conspicuously 'experimental' and 'continental' in their outlook, and when the careers of major figures such as Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and Paul Nash were seen to mature.¹ It is clear from accounts of this period, however, that this avant-garde moment was short-lived. One art historian has written: 'During the years 1931-4 ... the interested English public was to be prepared for a new period of internationalism'.² By around 1937, the same writer continued, there was 'the growth of an insular and conservative tendency'.³ It is this developing situation during the thirties which will provide the focus of enquiry in the chapters forming this section of the present study. In pursuit of this intention the values and ideals attached to concepts such as 'internationalism', 'modernism' and 'national identity' will be examined in the light of those British artists involved in a 'modern' art practice.

Over a period of only seven years, major changes had taken place in the ideas and values informing 'modern' art practice in Britain. It would appear that in British society in general this same period could also be typified as one of considerable change. The slump, for example, created both unemployment and poverty for some, while burgeoning technology and 'modernization' brought new commodities to those who could afford them. The historian A.J.P. Taylor has written of the changing material conditions at the time: 'The nineteen thirties, seemingly so drab and gloomy, witnessed both an economic and a technical revolution even though the effects of these revolutions became clear only later on. The economic revolution was quite simply the rise of the mass market'.⁴ The 'Great Slump' of the early thirties affected economies world-wide and led to political instability. Another historian, Eric Hobsbawm, has argued that the installation of 'nationalist' and 'warlike' regimes in Japan (1931) and Germany (1933) was an ominous sign: 'The gates to the Second World War were opened in 1931'.⁵

These economic, technological, and political developments in the 1930s gave rise to widespread anxiety and uncertainty. The role of 'modern' artists in Britain

at this time, and the relationship between their art practice and these wider social conditions, is a complex one. It is relatively straightforward, however, to demonstrate several ways in which economic and material conditions radically affected art practice. Two factors are of importance here: the first was the crisis of the art market precipitated by the economic depression of 1929; and the second was the opportunity for design work provided by the products of new technology and the development of new commodities.

The effect of the slump of 1929 on the livelihood of modern British artists is vividly demonstrated with reference to Paul Nash. His exhibition at the Leicester Gallery, London during November, 1928, was described by him as something of a watershed: 'Making a name. Achievement and success'.⁶ This optimism was justified by the sales recorded from the show which indicate that twenty-five of the thirty-four paintings were sold for a total of over £1351.⁷ Bearing in mind that Nash would probably have only counted half to two-thirds of this sum as earnings, it can nevertheless be compared with his *annual* income of £1191 in 1929, and £563 in 1930.⁸ Clearly times were not propitious.

The difficulties faced by modern artists in marketing easel paintings can, however, be contrasted with the new opportunities provided by commerce. A retrospective exhibition held in 1979 under the title *The Thirties* testified to the range of work undertaken at this time: from publicity required by developments in transport, to the design of new buildings, interior design and the many items supplied for the modern home.⁹ New materials, such as plastics, provided fresh possibilities, while the boom in electricity supply demanded the design of many new electrical items.¹⁰ In response to this situation artists, designers, and architects began to organize themselves into groups. For example, the Society of Industrial Artists was formed in 1930 to represent designers and to consider training and employment opportunities. Paul Nash held the post of president from 1932-34.

It can be said, then, that the period of the early thirties was a time when British society as a whole was experiencing economic uncertainty while also having to adjust and respond to the changing demands of modern commerce. Yet, in this climate young British artists such as Nash and Nicholson, interested in promoting an 'advanced' modern art, struggled to establish their careers. The present study

will take them to be representative of those who affirmed the imperative to be 'modern' and engaged with the idea of 'change' and 'progress'. As such, they can be contrasted with a group for whom 'the modern' was represented as a threat to 'stability', 'tradition' and 'authority'. The over-arching concern for this latter group was for 'conservation'.

A conservative position which claimed that 'national identity' was being damaged by the effects of 'the modern' appeared in a series of articles in *The Studio* in 1932. These articles were entitled 'What is wrong with Modern Painting' and they spread over five consecutive issues.¹¹ The articles were headed 'Internationalism', 'The pernicious influence of words', 'The superiority complex', 'False Economics', and 'Evolution'.

The first essay set the tone, announcing that 'There is a general impression today that all is not well with painting'.¹² The crisis alluded to was the falling market for easel pictures, and the target of criticism was clearly stated in the fourth article: 'it is the aimlessness of modern painting that is partly responsible for its economic chaos'.¹³ Interestingly the editor was anxious to point out that '...in no sense is our criticism reactionary. We must go forward, not back'.¹⁴ This editorial comment reveals that to take up a conservative position which did not appear 'extreme' required a negotiation of 'the modern', rather than a complete refusal of it.

The Studio had first been published in April 1893. During the thirties a typical spread of articles over several months would include those with an emphasis on connoisseurship, as well as those of a more theoretical kind. In general terms, it was a journal that appealed to the professional, academic artist; to the collector and connoisseur; and to the 'intelligent layman'.¹⁵ It was not denied that some form of 'modernization' was necessary, but for *The Studio* this amounted to no more than an 'updating' of styles and techniques. Above all, the point was to protect the existing hierarchies and structures of power based among 'traditional' bodies, such as The Royal Academy and groups of professional artists.

The locus of all that was wrong with 'the modern' was identified by *The Studio* as 'Internationalism'. A muddled and uncertain situation was represented where 'in the melting-pot the individual seems to lose his individuality...' ¹⁶ The root of

the problem lay in accepting what was 'alien'. Artists and writers who embraced 'Abstraction' and 'Theory' were seen as especially guilty of endorsing what was 'alien'. They were deemed elitist and contemptuous of the public. *The Studio* represented a situation where ideas were 'administered by a priesthood of critics before whom the poor painter bows down in worship'.¹⁷

Against 'Internationalism' was set 'Nationalism'. Where the former brought confusion, the latter brought clarity, and restored both 'individuality' and 'humanity'. The 'paralysing effect' of the abstract artist is replaced by 'The painter's proper business ... with the warm breathing world of flesh and blood and growing things'.¹⁸ The demands of 'the modern' world are made clear: 'Britain is looking for British pictures, of British people, of British landscape'.¹⁹ The cultural theorist, Raymond Williams, has drawn attention to the paradox of such an assertion: 'there is almost an inverse proportion in the twentieth century between the importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas'.²⁰ The significance of such evocations of 'the landscape' and 'the countryside' will be addressed in detail at a later point in this study.

The series of articles in *The Studio* expressed the belief that the 'modern' artist 'must show a willingness to paint what his clients want'.²¹ This seems an archaic understanding of the artist's role at a time when the 'modern artist' was usually represented as an individual driven by inner necessity rather than monetary gain. Nevertheless, for *The Studio*, the 'professional' artist remained a pragmatist responsive to the demands of clients. The final essay, 'Evolution', claimed that the new function of the modern artist was to respond to the new patrons who lived in 'suburban homes'.²² This subject was addressed more comprehensively in *The Studio* in September 1934, when most of the journal was devoted 'to articles on the use of pictures'.²³

The Studio emphasised art for private consumption where 'even in the simple modern interior a judicious arrangement of paintings on the wall is an excellent mode of decoration, and something more than decoration, seeing that it is food for the mind'.²⁴ The modern collector was typified by one writer as a man who spent fifty pounds a year on collecting art, which placed the clientele securely amongst the professional middle-classes and the wealthy.²⁵ In 'What People

Collect', Derek Patmore discussed four modern patrons. These were, Sir Edward Marsh, previously private secretary to H.H. Asquith, Lady Jowitt, The Hon. Gerald Chichester, and the actress Marie Ney.²⁶ The claim made in *The Studio* that modern art was for a 'simple modern interior', is somewhat belied by this choice of collectors and their stately dwellings.

One of Patmore's collectors, Sir Edward Marsh, had written elsewhere about his collection. There he had referred to two schemes that might have stimulated the suburban-dwelling, middle-class patron that *The Studio* had in mind. One was the library scheme launched by P.H.L. in Brook Street, London where you could subsequently purchase the picture if 'you find you can't live without it'.²⁷ The other was the Hire Purchase scheme for buying pictures, inaugurated by Messrs Tooth's in the same year. Both of these schemes aimed at stimulating the art market and providing the professional 'modern' artist, as defined by *The Studio*, with a clear role to paint pictures that would "'suit" a private sitting room'.²⁸ Department stores such as Selfridges and Harrods had also become outlets for the purchasing of modern art, often of a less conservative kind. Selfridges' exhibition of sculpture in May 1930, for example, included small-scale work by Epstein and Hepworth.

Selfridges' exhibition aimed at showing sculpture that was suitable for the garden and, along with the other examples of art marketing at the time, they were responding to what was perceived as the sovereignty of customer choice. Purchasers now had a variety of 'styles' to choose from depending on, as Marsh put it, whether it would 'suit' its intended environment. What guided purchasers was an awareness that in a world where commodities were available to a growing number of people, works of art retained the status of individuality and uniqueness over mass-produced items.²⁹ Duncan Macdonald claimed that the 'modern' collection was based on a combination of 'aesthetic instincts' and 'business sense'.³⁰ Marsh's art works ranged from the Old Masters to Stanley Spencer and John and Paul Nash, but he balked at abstraction, believing the purchase of such work to be motivated by 'snobbishness'.³¹ In contrast, one of Patmore's other collectors, the actress Marie Ney, was pictured in front of her two favourite works which hung side by side: one was an abstract by Ben Nicholson, the other a flower painting by the Scottish artist S.J. Peploe in the style of the post-impressionists.

Marsh's view of abstraction chimed in with the overall attitude of *The Studio* about the acceptable limits of 'the modern'. The journal had held consistently to its motto, stated in the first issue in 1893, that the quality of art was to be judged by the criteria of 'use and beauty'.³² Judged in these terms *The Studio* was ambivalent about 'abstraction'. Several months after the series of essays 'What is wrong with Modern Painting' there was an article on Hepworth and Nicholson.³³ The scepticism towards abstract art expressed in the series of essays was also present in the questions posed to these two artists. Typical was, 'What is the use of modern pictures of this kind? What place do they fill in modern life?' To this Nicholson replied: 'Modern painting in modern life has the same place and use as contemporary painting has always had and always will have in contemporary life - it is an inherent part of its vitality'.³⁴ His elliptical reply would have done little to allay any suspicions about the 'use' of abstraction. If abstract art was to be reconciled at all with the values of *The Studio* it could only be in the sense that it existed as 'decoration' within the domestic sphere, and was one 'style' amongst others. In this context any larger ambition abstract artists may have had of using their art to transform society became largely irrelevant.

One further example of how a fundamentally conservative body coped with the demands of 'the modern' can be seen from the activities of the Royal Academy of Arts during the early thirties. W.R.M. Lamb, Secretary of the Royal Academy since 1913, had defined that body as 'the custodian of precious elements which might be overlooked or mislaid in the general hurry...', thus affirming its essentially conservative function.³⁵ Yet the example of the Royal Academy is interesting because it did not simply resist 'the modern' but actively sought to negotiate it.

This can be observed from the Royal Academy's exhibition 'British Art in Industry', held in 1935 with the cooperation of the Royal Society of Arts.³⁶ The Prince of Wales was President of the General committee for this event and, the previous November, at a dinner given by the Society, he had made a keynote speech which sought to rally support in advance of the exhibition opening. *The Studio* reproduced 'extracts from his rousing speech', in which he warned that 'in these days of restricted markets and consequent restricted production nothing

should be neglected which may tend to increase demand', and exhorted artists to '...be alive and keep in touch with the ever-changing tastes and fashions in the world'.³⁷ This view of the economic imperative for Britain to adapt to the modern world was endorsed by the Royal Academy itself when it stated the aims for the exhibition as showing both 'the British as well as the foreign public' and 'British manufacturers' what the artist has done, and could do, for industry.³⁸ The organizers claimed to have consulted both artists and industry in preparation for the exhibition and ostensibly the Academy affirmed the vigorous 'modern' partnership between the two. This affirmation is undermined, however, by the diffident statement in the same article that now 'the lion manufacturer has laid down with the lamb artist'.³⁹

This last statement implies that the organizers of the exhibition had not grasped what, for others, was seen as a complementary and egalitarian relationship between modern artist and industry. This was reflected in the exhibits which were elegant and decorative rather than utilitarian. One reviewer couched his criticism in mild terms: 'The inspiration provided by machine forms, the satisfying simplicity which follows from the logic of the machine, has not yet received full attention'.⁴⁰ The response from Paul Nash was more scathing. He complained that artists and designers had not been consulted about the work on show, and described the exhibits as 'expensive flummery' that did not acknowledge 'a true alliance of art and industry'.⁴¹

Nash concluded that the exhibition '...is no more representative of contemporary production in that field than the Royal Academy's Exhibition of Fine Art is representative of the modern achievement in painting and sculpture'.⁴² His views illustrate both the incompatibility of different values and attitudes when they are seen to bear down on definitions of 'the modern', and the ability of The Royal Academy to accommodate change by framing its own account of 'the modern'. The activities of the Royal Academy conform to the terms identified by the historian Martin Weiner as those representing a 'culture of containment'. That is, when those in positions of power perceive something to be threatening to the status quo they will often seek to incorporate it, thus limiting the risk of direct confrontation.⁴³ This exhibition at the Royal Academy demonstrated the body's fundamental conservatism but it did not amount to a strident assertion of 'Britishness'. It was rather an attempt to incorporate 'the modern' within a set of

practices and ideas internal to its own sense of modernity, the point being to divest 'the modern' of its more radical, and consequently, more threatening, aspect.

The foregoing discussion has shown how those taking up a 'conservative' position had to negotiate 'the modern'. The exhibition at the Royal Academy and the articles from *The Studio* demonstrate how 'modern art' was only considered acceptable if it did not pose a threat to those values and ideals held to be innately 'British'. 'Extreme' modern art was defined as 'international' and 'alien', paying too much attention to 'abstraction' and 'theory'. 'Abstraction' was seen as synonymous with a loss of 'individuality'. All of these things were seen to stand in direct opposition to an innate 'British' tendency towards 'the landscape' and other subjects dealing with 'humanity'. The true 'professional', it was claimed, responded to the client's needs. Those who engaged in modernist experimentation and theorising were regarded as 'amateurs' whose work should not be taken too seriously.

It was this conservative position that was to be contested by those artists referred to earlier, such as Nash and Nicholson, who were prepared to consider more radical change in the name of 'progress'. Yet their challenge did not amount to a simple rejection of the values and ideals of the conservative. The following chapters will go on to examine the practice of those avant-garde artists and writers who continued to struggle over the often conflicting demands of being both 'modern' and 'British'.

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- 9 *The Thirties* exhibition catalogue, op cit.
- 10 According to information given by A.J.P. Taylor in *English History 1914-1945*, the electricity supply industry increased its consumers from three quarters of a million in 1920 to nine millions in 1938. (Pelican edition, 1970), p426.
- 11 'What is wrong with Modern Painting', *The Studio*, volume 103, (January-June 1932).
- 12 Ibid., p63.
- 13 Ibid., p248.

- 14 *Ibid.*, p325.
- 15 For a more detailed discussion of the character and audience of
The Studio see Appendix 1.
- 16 'What is wrong with Modern Painting', *op cit.*, p63.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p164. Critics like Roger Fry, R.H. Wilenski and Herbert
Read would appear to be those they had in mind.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p165.
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- 29 See Sir Edward Marsh, 'Patronage in Art Today', op cit., p78.
- 30 Duncan Macdonald, 'Buying Pictures', op cit., p122.
- 31 'Patronage in Art Today', op cit., p80.
- 32 For a fuller discussion of this see Appendix 1.
- 33 'The aim of the modern artist', *The Studio*, volume 104, (1932), pp332-333.
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- 35 'What the Royal Academy Stands For', *Art in England*, op cit., p54.
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CHAPTER 3

From Bloomsbury to *Unit One*: negotiating values and ideals.

In order to reach a clearer understanding of the 'new' avant-garde in British art during the early thirties some consideration of Bloomsbury aesthetics is important. Paul Nash, for example, acknowledged the impact of Bell and Fry on his early artistic development. He recalled how, in 1911, when he and his new friend Ben Nicholson returned to the Slade it was '...seething under the influence of Post-Impressionism. Roger Fry had brought about the second exhibition of modern continental art in London, and now all the cats were out of the bag.'¹ Henry Moore had also commented in 1961 when reflecting on his student years, that 'Once you'd read Roger Fry the whole thing was there.'² Although the relationship between those individuals associated with Bloomsbury and these younger artists was at times equivocal, the ideals, values and patronage of the former continued to inform the practice of the latter.

According to Quentin Bell, the son of Vanessa Bell, 'Bloomsbury was begotten ... at the Trinity College during the autumn of 1899'.³ The members of the group, he said, were all 'from middle-class homes and from a variety of cultural backgrounds'.⁴ Against accusations that Bloomsbury was an 'intellectual mafia' Bell stressed the informality of the group:

It had no form of membership, no rules, no leaders; it can hardly be said to have had any common ideas about art, literature or politics, and although it had, I believe, a common attitude to life and was united by friendships, it was as amorphous a body as a group of friends can be.⁵

Bloomsbury can be seen as an intellectual front formed to challenge what was perceived as a British society pervaded with moral hypocrisy, and beleaguered by outmoded conventions and 'traditional' forms of organization. It was therefore not surprising that its affiliates should have advanced 'informality' and 'friendship' as important values for the group. What Bell's comment does not fully reveal, though, is how, despite its apparent informality, the 'common attitude to life' shared by the Bloomsbury group led to the exercise of considerable power and influence. The cultural theorist Raymond Williams

made the following observation:

It can be said, it was often said, that the group had no *general* position. But why did it need one? If you cared to look, there were Virginia and Morgan for literature, Roger and Clive and Vanessa and Duncan for art, Leonard for politics, Maynard for economics. Didn't these just about cover the proper interests of all civilised people?⁶

Quentin Bell believed that the period 1924-31 was a time when the individuals who formed the nucleus of the Bloomsbury group were at the peak of their careers. He saw it as the high-point of Bloomsbury's achievements and influence.⁷ It can be demonstrated, though, that while their influence was considerable, it was also a time when the changing social conditions required some of Bloomsbury's central values and ideals to be re-asserted or revised. The art market at the time has already been characterised as one where there was a slump in purchasing, with a steady shift in the type of patron and the art they were seeking to buy. Bloomsbury's power and influence was particularly apparent in the sphere of art patronage where two groups were formed to promote their interests: these were the London Artists' Association (LAA), and the Contemporary Art Society (CAS). Taken together their cultural influence was extensive during the thirties. The LAA was set up to develop a private patronage network and offer some financial security for modern British artists who found favour. The CAS was primarily concerned with providing work, mostly British but not exclusively so, for public museums and galleries.

Many of the same individuals were involved in both enterprises. Fry was instrumental in the planning and inception of the LAA as early as 1909, while the CAS was formed later in 1926. Wealthy collectors such as the economist John Maynard Keynes and the industrialist Samuel Courtauld were the financial 'guarantors' for many of the LAA shows and, during the thirties, along with Fry and Bell, they sat on the CAS purchasing committee.⁸ The LAA offered artists financial security by paying them a retainer, and organized exhibitions to sell work. In 1927 Paul Nash benefited from this arrangement with an annual income of £150, plus seventy per cent of sales from LAA shows.⁹

The CAS existed on subscriptions from individuals and municipal bodies, and each six months two members were given the opportunity to exercise their good taste by effecting purchases. In 1937 it was the responsibility of Maynard Keynes and Edward Marsh. The latter also served as the Chairman from 1936-1952 and seemed to wield considerable influence.¹⁰ When Keynes became ill during 1937, the task fell entirely to Marsh. Marsh's dislike for abstract art has already been noted in the previous chapter, and CAS purchasing during the thirties clearly excluded some avant-garde work of this kind. Ben Nicholson seemed to realise as early as 1924 that he was unlikely to benefit greatly from the Bloomsbury-influenced art network and he joined the *Seven and Five* in 1924 exhibiting with them each year until it disbanded in 1935.¹¹

The CAS during the thirties has been described by Alan Bowness, a committee member from the sixties onwards, as marked by 'cosy complacency' and 'dominated by a clique of well-meaning patricians'.¹² The informality of purchasing procedures has also been commented upon:

...certainly discussion must have taken place as to which artists were worthy of consideration, but no such debate is recorded in the minutes of the committee's meetings. It seems to have been accepted that the individual purchaser for each year should proceed without restraint of any kind on his personal taste, interests and, in some cases, friendship with artists.¹³

Maynard Keynes wrote about the early years of the LAA in similar terms. It was founded, he said, on 'cooperative principles' when 'Three friends who were interested in modern painting came forward...'¹⁴ This trust the organizers of the CAS and the LAA placed on 'taste' and 'informality' is consistent with a principal tenet of Bloomsbury: the idea of 'amateurism'.

The idea of the 'amateur' was fundamental to the aesthetic developed by Bell and Fry in the early part of the century. Fry's concept of 'disinterested contemplation' and Bell's of 'significant form' were used to define an 'aesthetic experience' which was to be enjoyed as a 'pure' experience untainted by the base values of the everyday world.¹⁵ It was anathema to them that paintings could be purchased for commercial reasons alone or that artists should work for

mere financial gain. The purpose of art, said Fry, was to awaken our 'imaginative life' and enable us to experience 'an existence more real and more important than any that we know of in mortal life'.¹⁶ Bell wrote, 'Let everyone make himself an amateur ... By practising an art, it is possible that people will acquire sensibility'.¹⁷

With the changing social and economic conditions from the mid-twenties onwards it became increasingly necessary for Bloomsbury to defend this idea. As early as 1920 Fry observed 'a populace saturated with snobbishness, ... regarding art chiefly for its value as a symbol of social distinctions'.¹⁸ He held in contempt, 'The man who only buys pictures when he has as many motor-cars as he can conceivably want'.¹⁹ For Fry and Bell it was not the task of the artist to respond to public demand, as *The Studio* had asserted.²⁰ The idea of 'the amateur' was essential to Bloomsbury. It signified the importance placed on 'autonomy' and 'disinterest' in the production of 'great' art. The artist motivated primarily by 'business' could not produce art of this quality. Yet it was just this sense of 'utility' that *The Studio* affirmed as the principal concern of the 'professional' artist. The importance placed by *The Studio* on 'utility' was thus held in tension with the value Bloomsbury accorded to the 'amateur'.

There would appear to be an irreconcilable difference between *The Studio* and Bloomsbury over these twin concepts of the 'amateur' and the 'professional'. Raymond Williams' enquiry into the class position of Bloomsbury is helpful at this juncture. He proposes that the members of Bloomsbury are:

...a fraction of the ruling class in the sense both that they belong integrally to it, directly serving the dominant social order, and that they are a coherent division of it, defined by the values of a specific higher education: the possession of a general, rather than a merely national and class-bound, culture; and the practice of specific intellectual and professional skills.²¹

Williams' use of the term 'dominant social order' can perhaps be understood in the light of Antonio Gramsci's definition of hegemony. For Gramsci, the term 'hegemony' described the way a society cohered around the leadership of a fundamental class. Gramsci defined 'hegemony' as:

The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.²²

Gramsci believed that the right of a dominant group to lead was gained by popular consent rather than coercion, and that hegemony was never 'fixed' but constantly fought over. If, as Williams suggests, Bloomsbury represented a fraction of this dominant group, it is not surprising that their position was, at times, both an ambiguous and contradictory one.

Bloomsbury were cautious not to ally themselves too closely to the aristocrats but it was the plutocrats - the wealthy, rising industrial bourgeoisie - who were singled out for attack. Fry disparaged the power of the plutocracy and its effect on art patronage in the twentieth century: 'The aristocrat had taste, the plutocrat frequently has not'.²³ Bell vilified the plutocrats for their philistinism, crude nationalism, anti-intellectualism and hypocrisy.²⁴ This would appear to render inexplicable the alliance between Bloomsbury and industrialists such as Samuel Courtauld. Yet in a speech to the Engineers' Club, Manchester in 1942 Courtauld said:

I believe that the worship of material values is the fatal disease from which our age is suffering, and that, if we do not eradicate this worship, it will inevitably destroy our whole society and not even leave us any business to discuss.²⁵

Essentially these are Bloomsbury values. The historian Martin J. Weiner offers an explanation for the holding of such views, referring to them as, 'the gentrification of the industrialist'²⁶. He describes how:

As a rule, leaders of commerce and industry in England over the past century have accommodated themselves to an elite culture blended of preindustrial and religious values and more recent

professional and bureaucratic values that inhibited their quest for expansion, productivity, and profit.²⁷

Williams' and Weiner's analyses, taken together, indicate two things. First, a fracture in the dominant social order can be discerned which roughly separates the 'aristocrat' from the 'plutocrat'. Moreover, despite their efforts to distance themselves from the aristocrats Fry and Bell remain 'gentrified' in their values and ideals. From this position issues of 'money-making' or 'profit' are treated with contempt and belong to the debased values of the plutocracy. The second thing to emerge is the evident tension and antagonism that is produced between the two fractions. As Weiner suggests, there exists a fundamental incompatibility between the holding of gentrified values and the demands of capitalist enterprise.

This analysis of the relationship between Bloomsbury and the dominant social order is complicated still further by a consideration of Bell's critical position in 1935. In this year he wrote an essay for *The Studio* entitled 'What Next in Art'.²⁸ That Bell should be contributing to a journal that was usually antagonistic to Bloomsbury values is at first surprising. In his essay he acknowledged that post-impressionism, central to Bloomsbury, had 'run its course'.²⁹ He expressed doubts as to whether Paris would 'continue to be the University of Painters' suggesting that 'for economic reasons a Parisian education will become a rare luxury'.³⁰ 'I ask myself - or I ask you', he continued, 'whether a new generation will not be inclined to look for sustenance to national motives and national traditions'.³¹ This belief in the loss of Paris as the well-spring of artistic activity required the search for a new, stable centre. In pursuing this thought Bell disposed of Surrealism as a dead end, and of abstract artists as 'accomplished sayers with nothing to say'.³²

Bell's rejection of certain modern art, especially abstraction, and his belief that there would be a return to a 'modern' art practice based on 'national' characteristics aligned him quite closely to the conservative position usually taken up by *The Studio*. Bell expressed several other ideas which confirmed this. He expressed doubt, for example, that there was much 'foreign' art of quality, disparaging work from Italy, Russia and Germany in a way that questions the measure of Bloomsbury's vaunted 'internationalism'.³³ He also considered 'theory' to be something alien, and was suspicious of those artists and critics who

promoted it: 'What German painters have done is to paint pictures about which German philosophers and Mr Herbert Read can spin theories'.³⁴ The earlier discussion of CAS purchases during the early thirties, when there was evidence of a reluctance to acquire abstract work, can perhaps be seen in the light of this comment. Bell's remark also testifies to the antagonism between his own theories and those of the younger generation of modern artists championed by Read.

Bell concluded that the future of modern English art lay in the reassertion of a fundamental 'Englishness':

It seems pretty certain that the next phase of English painting - indeed it is already the present - will be the exploitation of the national heritage by artists whose sensibility has been tempered by the discipline of Cézanne and the abstract painters.³⁵

Bell named Duncan Grant, the Nashes, Keith Baynes, A. G. du Plessis, Vanessa Bell and Matthew Smith who, taken together, could be categorised as 'English post-Impressionists'.³⁶ Although Paul Nash might appear the exception, it is unlikely that he would have been chosen by Bell for his interest in Surrealism. Bell also leaves out any artists interested in modern abstract work.

Thus, in the light of Raymond Williams' analysis of Bloomsbury, Clive Bell's own account of the contemporary situation suggests that Bloomsbury maintained the ambiguous position it had always held as a class fraction of the dominant social order. As Williams has suggested, Bloomsbury can best be seen as 'a revolt against the class but for the class'.³⁷ That is, despite the antagonism between class fractions, at times of perceived instability there is evidence of a convergence of interests. This is apparent, for example, in the reassertion of 'national identity' and the importance placed on concepts such as 'tradition' and 'heritage'. At such times 'Britishness' becomes emblematic for all that is stable and 'the foreign' for all that is threatening. It is also significant that Bell showed the same tendency as *The Studio* to reject certain modern work as 'un-British'. The restatement of 'authority' through an assertion of 'Britishness', and the closure placed on some, mostly abstract, modern art define a form of conservatism that was common to both Bell and *The Studio*.

This conservatism was by no means simple, or unitary, as has been shown, but what bound it together and made it conservative, were a series of multiple negative responses to the demands of modernity as they arose in the 1930s. As such this apparent convergence of ideas between these class fractions was only provisional. Bloomsbury still maintained its distinctive understanding of 'Britishness' in several ways. Firstly, by a commitment to some, albeit narrowly defined, form of 'internationalism', yet one which still avoided the parochialism of some conservatives; and secondly, by an insistence on 'amateurism' as a concept pivotal to their aesthetic, providing a crucial distinction for maintaining the 'autonomy of art' in the face of the perceived 'professional' money-making interests of the industrial bourgeoisie.

It was Quentin Bell's belief that in the mid-thirties Bloomsbury '...as a group ceased to exist'.³⁸ He marked this in several ways. The first was by the deaths of Lytton Strachey in 1931 and Roger Fry in 1934. The second was by the claim that at a time when Fascism was growing, Bloomsbury values such as reason, tolerance, scepticism and pacifism would have gained little support.³⁹ Bell's choice of words, that Bloomsbury 'as a group' ceased to exist is important here. As mentioned at the start of this chapter it was clear that several of the key artists who were to become associated with the British avant-garde of the early thirties testified to the formative influence of Bloomsbury. The formation of *Unit One* in 1933 can be seen as a fragile new alignment of artists who were responding to the ideals and demands of changed social and economic conditions. At the same time there is also evidence that many of the Bloomsbury ideals, such as those of 'significant form', 'individualism' and 'amateurism' were not abandoned but held in tension with the imperative to be 'modern'. It is also apparent that the issue of 'national identity' remained one of central importance to certain key members of this group. In order to understand more clearly the character of this new avant-garde it will be necessary, at this point, to study *Unit One* more closely.

Unit One

Herbert Read wrote of the objectives of *Unit One* that: 'They can hold joint exhibitions and share the expenses of advertisements and circulars ... but the essential bond in such a unit is idealistic; it is not in any sense technical'.⁴⁰ This

attests to the twofold function of *Unit One*. Firstly, it was a practical bloc, formed in response to the economic exigencies of the time; and secondly, it was to explore the aesthetic and ideological implications of an 'advanced' art in England.

Paul Nash announced the formation of the group in a letter to *The Times*. They would act, he said, as 'a unit; a solid combination standing by each other and defending their beliefs'. At the same time they are 'not composed of, let us say, three individuals and eight imitators, but of 11 individuals'.⁴¹ The group consisted of two architects, two sculptors and seven painters. The emphasis on individuality was also taken up by Read in his introduction to the *Unit One* book:

The modern artist is essentially an individualist: his general desire is not to conform to any pattern, to follow any lead, to take any instructions - but to be as original as possible, to be himself and to express himself in his art.⁴²

The formation of *Unit One* was, in his view, a necessary response to the demands of the modern world in which 'artists must combine to give their individuality a semblance of order'.⁴³

The position articulated by Nash and Read was consonant with Bloomsbury ideals, in which the freedom and individuality of the artist was considered paramount to his or her function as 'prophet and priest ... the articulate soul of mankind'.⁴⁴ As Raymond Williams concluded: '...the final nature of Bloomsbury as a group is that it is indeed, and differentially, a group of and for the notion of free individuals'.⁴⁵ It was Ben Nicholson's single-minded pursuit of abstraction which, albeit unintentionally, caused Nash to fear that the 'individualism' of *Unit One* members was under threat. In a letter to Nash, Wells Coates described how Nicholson had suggested that Bigge should join the 7&5 'until he had worked out his salvation'.⁴⁶ Nash's response indicated his fear of an aesthetic galvanized by Nicholson's pursuit of abstraction: 'By the way, later when we meet, I should like to discuss rather strictly the nursery of the 7&5; that idea, to my mind, is just a little sinister'.⁴⁷

This incident points to the provisional nature of the shared values and ideals on

which *Unit One* was based. It also demonstrates the importance placed on 'individualism' by both Nash and Read, probably the two key apologists of *Unit One*. The appeal to 'individualism', however, becomes more complex and modulated when it is articulated with the concepts of 'the amateur' and 'the professional'. This is apparent from the 'Nature and Art' debate which appeared in *The Times* during April and May 1933. It is a particularly significant debate for the part Paul Nash played in it, and for its culmination in his announcement of the formation of *Unit One*.

The debate was triggered by reviews of two exhibitions by *The Times'* art critic in April 1933.⁴⁸ One was at the Mayor Gallery, London, and featured the recent work of European artists including Braque, Picasso and Ernst, alongside British artists such as Tristram Hillier, Paul Nash, John Armstrong, Edward Wadsworth and Henry Moore. The other was entitled *Important Landscapes* and featured Walter Sickert, Matthew Smith, Wilson Steer, Augustus John, J. D. Innes, Duncan Grant and Spencer Gore. Generally, work at the first of these shows was considered by *The Times'* art critic to be 'architectural' and tending towards 'design' and 'decoration'. This he defined as 'new art' and the domain of the 'professional'. Work at the second show, based on the 'representation of nature', was termed 'old art' and belonged to the realm of 'the amateur'.⁴⁹ The idea that modern art had 'architectural' qualities was not a new one but had been discussed at length by the art critic and historian R. H. Wilenski in his book, *The Modern Movement in Art*, published in 1927. Wilenski described the task of the architect and modern painter as similar, both being '...concerned from first to last with problems of formal relations'.⁵⁰ He believed Paul Nash to be 'the leading, because the most subtle, artist of the modern movement in this country'.⁵¹

When the two exhibitions mentioned above were reviewed in *The Times* it drew an angry response from Henry Tonks, a professor at the Slade. *The Times'* art critic had not used the words 'old' and 'new' as terms of disdain, and had admitted his ambivalence about the future role of 'new art'. Yet Tonks was affronted by the implication that art which attended to 'Nature' was somehow old-fashioned.⁵² He responded sarcastically to the idea that the modern artist was the new 'professional' while the artist working from Nature was relegated to an 'amateur' status.⁵³ Rising above these categories, said Tonks, was 'the

individual' whose influence was decisive:

...no sooner does any body of men claim a position ... than some horrid individual will begin to say nasty things about it. And then some unpleasant Hogarth or Charles Keene will refuse to try to become a professional and will take to pleasing the people by means of the old wicked ways...⁵⁴

Nash entered the argument by defending *The Times* art critic's position regarding the 'new type of professional' artist:

Because of the architectonic quality of his art its expression naturally carries him beyond the limits of easel painting. As a designer pre-eminently he is equipped for new problems, and many of these belong to the province of the industrial world now gradually opening under his hand.⁵⁵

Nash is careful to distinguish his 'new professional' from the one described by Tonks. The professional, wrote Tonks, was the artist who had to strive to 'catch the eye of the public'.⁵⁶ This echoes the view of *The Studio*, discussed in the previous chapter, that the professional must 'show a willingness to paint what the client wants'.⁵⁷ Against this, Nash argued that the artist should be '...occupied in a more serious pursuit than catching the public eye and trying to please it'.⁵⁸

This last claim by Nash exemplifies the ambivalent position of the new avant-garde in England of which he was a part. On the one hand it suggests a continued belief in the values associated with the disinterested 'amateur' and an antipathy towards the type of professionalism advocated by Tonks and *The Studio*. In this respect the ties with Bloomsbury remained strong and influential. The insistence, by Nash and Read, on *Unit One* as an informal grouping of individuals motivated by personal taste and sensibility would be an equally fitting description for the activities of the CAS and the LAA.⁵⁹

On the other hand Nash defines the 'new professional' in a way that is distinct from, and antagonistic to, Bloomsbury ideals. The artist, he claims, should be

prepared to respond to the opportunities offered by society. In defence against the accusation frequently levelled at Bloomsbury that modern art was 'art for art's sake', he defined the role of the modern artist as 'closely associated with national life, instead of the aloof onlooker we are accustomed to'.⁶⁰ In this way Nash was asserting a difference between the new avant-garde and the old. His evocation of 'industry' as the appropriate domain of the 'new professional' would have sat uneasily alongside Bloomsbury's distaste for art production driven by commercial concerns. Although the Omega Workshops had been established by Bloomsbury in 1913 as a commercial venture, its activities bore little relationship to the products of industry. Despite his disparaging tone, Herbert Read's assessment of the workshops was fairly accurate:

This experiment was very nearly a success - a success that is to say, with the small and snobbish public which can afford to buy individualistic art in a machine age.⁶¹

There has been evidence from the foregoing discussion that 'individualism' can be articulated as part of a conservative or avant-garde discourse. It is significant that 'individualism' remained a constant signifier of 'Britishness' and, during the thirties, it was one of the central concepts marshalled to identify certain abstract art as 'un-British', while validating figurative art as 'typically British'. This posed particular problems for the existence of *Unit One*. From the outset Paul Nash had made it clear that although he remained open to 'modern' international trends in art he also wanted to preserve a sense of national identity. Nash made an initial suggestion that they could be called the 'English Contemporary Group' because 'it covers the ground, it is easy and will explain itself to foreigners'.⁶² His interest in a national tradition is again evident from his contribution to the *Unit One* book. At the outset he set himself the task of answering the question 'To what extent has contemporary art in England a national character?'⁶³ He concluded that it was 'lyrical' and to be found in the English tradition of portraits and landscapes.⁶⁴ Nash's declared position would suggest that there would at least be some tension between the 'figurative' and 'abstract' interests that coexisted in *Unit One*.

Ben Nicholson was the most determined champion of the 'abstract' interests of the group. His difference from Nash is demonstrated by his own essay for the

Unit One book.⁶⁵ Unlike Nash he made no mention of national boundaries, but wrote of the need to explore universal 'truths'. Nicholson's essay was one third of the length of Nash's and appeared laconic and cryptic even to Read who wrote to him prior to publication to encourage him, unsuccessfully, to add more:

...it will look as though you did not think it worthwhile saying more ... I am quite sure you have a good deal more to say that would be very interesting, and very surprising to some people - eg. your remarks about religion.⁶⁶

Nicholson's indifference to further exposition, particularly in contrast to Nash's lively exhortation, could have been seen by *The Studio* to vindicate their opinion that 'abstraction' was cold, theoretical and alien; against the warmth and humanity of 'British' art.⁶⁷

It is evident that behind Nash and Read's outward show of unity within *Unit One* there existed some fundamental disagreements over stylistic and aesthetic issues. While the formation of the group was being discussed Nash had written to Moore of his concerns: 'Ben is a good fellow but I do not regard his judgement as entirely sound - and I believe you agree on this'.⁶⁸ That there was a lack of any coherent aesthetic values shared by the group is also apparent from Edward Burra's dismissal of Hepworth's essay from the *Unit One* book. In a letter to Nash he wrote:

I've never laughed so much in my life Barbara Hepworth is "such fun" life is just a toy balloon full of blue circles and red circles and upper circles and round we go in circles. [Punctuation as original]⁶⁹

A fissure in *Unit One* over the value or meaning attached to 'abstract' and 'figurative' art was clearly present from its inception. Even after the group disbanded in 1935 the debate continued among its leading members. The writings of Read and Nash complement each other by clustering ideas and values around figurative art. Such art, provided them with the evidence of a continuing 'national' tradition.

Writing in 1936, Read located the new dynamic of modern art in Surrealism. By suggesting a resolution of the normally diametrically opposed 'Romantic' and 'Classical', Read was able to reconcile such qualities as 'individualism', 'humanism', and 'the landscape', all of which in turn were to be central and enduring features of 'Englishness'. The 'classic' and 'romantic', he writes:

correspond rather to the husk and the seed, the shell and the kernel. There is a principle of life, of creation, of liberation, and that is the romantic spirit; there is a principle of order, or control and of repression, and that is the classical spirit.⁷⁰

Surrealism offered a solution for Read: it was seen to embrace the romantic concept of 'the individual', while at the same time avoiding mere eccentricity by endorsing the rationality of 'Classicism':

...with the aid of modern dialectics and modern psychology, in the name of Marx and Freud, ... they [ie. the Surrealists] have found themselves in a position to put their beliefs and practices on a scientific basis.⁷¹

This presumed resolution of 'the romantic' and 'the classical' with Surrealism as the locus also allowed Read to accommodate his belief in the 'humanistic' qualities of art. When he wrote in 1934 of the centrality of 'abstract' art to industrial production he nevertheless maintained the importance of 'humanistic art' for giving, 'expression in plastic form of human ideals and emotions'.⁷² 'Humanism' is usually commensurate with 'classicism' in its emphasis on reason rather than emotion. For Read, though, Surrealism could be seen as 'humanist' by its combination of structural purpose and a concern with the 'human condition'.

In Read's essay on Surrealism he wrote of English artists such as William Blake, Constable, Turner, Samuel Palmer and the pre-Raphaelites anticipating Surrealism. They were seen to form part of a tradition of individuals who were 'not afraid to experiment with their sensations'.⁷³ Read's inclusion of a number of landscape painters draws an implicit connection between landscape painting, Romanticism and 'Englishness'.⁷⁴

Nash's correspondence in the 'Nature and Art' debate, his 'manifesto' for *Unit One* in *The Times*, and his essay for the *Unit One* book, as previously discussed, are in accordance with Read's view of 'English' art. It might seem incongruous that 'abstraction' was also accepted so readily by these men, but it is entirely consistent with their support for tolerance and 'individualism', and a genuine openness to 'modern' ideas. Read, Nash and Moore all held the opinion that 'figurative' and 'abstract' art could 'coexist'.⁷⁵

The ideological ground shared by these artists and writers coheres to some extent around the concept of 'significant form' as defined by Clive Bell in 1914:

...lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call "significant form"; and "significant form" is the one quality common to all works of art.⁷⁶

Nash, writing in 1932, endorsed this:

Modern art, as I understand it ... is an attempt to recapture meaning itself. In other words, to create something which shall have meaning. [Nash's emphasis.] Clive Bell's phrase "significant form" was intended to express the idea, and in spite of a good deal of buffeting, his description still seems to me intelligible.⁷⁷

The shared acceptance of 'significant form', provided some coherence between members of *Unit One*, while also retaining an affinity with Bloomsbury. It becomes clear, however, that the resolute articulation by Read and Nash of 'Romanticism', 'Humanism', 'Surrealism' and 'the landscape' with an enduring 'Englishness', left some forms of 'abstraction' out on the periphery of modern British art practice, or left them consigned to the field of 'design'.

The more acceptable face of 'abstraction' was typified by the *Unit One* member

Edward Wadsworth. From an early 'Vorticist' style of abstraction in the pre-war years, he was, by the mid-thirties producing work that was at times 'abstract' but usually combined with decorative still-life elements and nautical references which were used to evoke a surrealist unease. Wadsworth's ability to blend a variety of modern styles led a critic in 1937 to describe both him and Stanley Spencer as typically 'English' in their ability 'to paint facts rather than forms'.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the critic continued, underlying Wadsworth's use of an 'international fashion' is 'the nationalism which cannot help coming out'.⁷⁹

It was the more determined commitment by Nicholson and Hepworth to the formal aspects of abstraction without any obvious figurative reference that proved to be less acceptable. An uneasiness had been expressed in a review of the *Unit One* exhibition, when a sympathetic critic wrote of his concern over the function of this form of abstract art, saying that it appeared to be 'at a loose end'.⁸⁰ In 1935 Nash wrote of the limitations of abstraction: 'I find my piece of world cannot be expressed within the restrictions of a non-figurative idiom'.⁸¹ For him 'abstraction' was allied to 'design':

...when I am at liberty to change my mood, and can turn to the geometrical planning of a textile or other form of industrial design, I fancy that I gain something in the release from all representational problems.⁸²

This reduction of 'abstraction' to an aspect of 'design', while implying that 'figurative' art had a 'higher' function, was also suggested by Read. He likened abstract art to mathematics: 'Here is no impressionism, no poetry, no symbolism; but something as exact and representational as a mathematical diagram'.⁸³ Nicholson disagreed with this view in an essay of 1941: 'The geometrical forms often used by abstract artists do not indicate, as has been thought, a conscious and intellectual mathematical approach...'⁸⁴ A further discrepancy with Read's view of abstract art is evident from Hepworth's *Unit One* essay:

In an electric train moving south I see a blue aeroplane between a ploughed field and a green field, pylons in lovely juxtaposition with springy turf and trees of every stature ... it is the relationship and the mystery that makes such loveliness and I want to project

my feeling about it into sculpture.⁸⁵

Here Hepworth describes the importance of the landscape to her work, where sculpture is seen as a vehicle for expressing the inscrutable relationship between man and nature. Similarly, Nicholson wrote that he sought to evoke the 'actual quality' of places by creating 'equivalents' through abstraction.⁸⁶ Hepworth and Nicholson appear neither to perceive any incompatibility between mathematics and poetry, nor do their views eschew a certain 'Romantic' sensibility. What the above discussion does demonstrate, though, is the extent to which Nash and Read could not fully endorse, or perhaps understand, the 'abstract art' practice of Hepworth and Nicholson.

Although 'abstraction' could not be so easily dismissed as the systematic elimination of all human dimensions and concerns, it is evident that Nicholson and Hepworth did employ abstract means to express what they believed to be the metaphysical 'essence' underlying everyday experience. The idealism of this ambition was expressed in Nicholson's *Unit One* essay:

As I see it, painting and religious experience are the same thing, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realisation of infinity - an idea which is complete, with no beginning, no end, and therefore giving to all things for all time.⁸⁷

This 'universalism' embodied in abstraction was characterised by conservative critics as too theoretical, arid, anti-humanist, anti-traditionalist, and in all these respects 'un-English'. In contrast 'Englishness' was based on the 'particular', which was seen as the antithesis of the 'universal'. The focus was 'the countryside' - a natural spiritual home, where people can begin to experience both the security of tradition, and the profundity of the 'English' inheritance. This attitude was encapsulated in the opening programme of a series of BBC talks on national character broadcast during 1933-4. Arthur Bryant expressed just this faith:

Most of us to-day are town-dwellers, yet there are very few of us whose great-great-great grandparents were not country folk, and,

even if we have no idea who they were or from what shire they hailed, our subconscious selves hark back to their instincts and ways of life. We are shut off from them as it were by a dark tunnel of two or three generations - lost in the darkness of the Industrial Revolution - but beyond is the sunlight of the green fields from which we came.⁸⁸

In his *Unit One* essay Nash expressed similar views about the familiarity and ineffability of the English landscape, declaring his affinity with the artist William Blake, who had: 'perceived among many things the hidden significance of the land he always called Albion. For him, Albion possessed great spiritual personality...'⁸⁹ Like Bryant, Nash also wanted to embed this 'English personality' in the past, which for him stretched back to pre-history:

Last summer, I walked in a field near Avebury where two rough monoliths stand up, sixteen feet high, miraculously patterned with black and orange lichen, remnants of the avenue of stones which led to the Great Circle. A mile away, a green pyramid casts a gigantic shadow. In the hedge, at hand, the white trumpet of a convolvulus turns from its spiral stem, following the sun. In my art I would solve such an equation.⁹⁰

It emerges from the above discussion that conflicting attitudes existed towards 'the modern'. From a relatively conservative position 'the modern' represented a source of new ideas that could be adopted to 'update' the styles and techniques of a secure and immutable 'national tradition'. This was incompatible with the abstract art of Hepworth and Nicholson which represented a more radical and intractable face of 'the modern'. To the conservative such art was considered 'foreign' to the 'national temper' and a threat to established authority.

Unit One occupied an ambivalent position in relation to 'the modern'. At first the group cohered around the need to respond to the demands and opportunities available to the 'advanced' artist in the modern world. At root, however, were fundamental and irreconcilable differences within the group. To some extent Read and Nash remained committed to the 'modern' ideas and values associated with abstraction. Yet the values they articulated were clustered around the idea

of an 'English tradition', and Nash's assertion that 'figurative art' and 'the landscape' were more innately 'English', comes close to collapsing into a more conventional conservatism.

It has already been established that 'the landscape' was a motif of particular significance during the thirties, especially when articulated with 'Englishness'. This theme will be pursued further in the following chapter using the production of Shell posters and books as the main focus. Shell is of particular relevance here, not just for the evidence it provides of the growing potency of images of the 'English landscape' in the mid- to late-thirties. The Shell operation also exemplifies the complex relationship between 'Englishness' and 'the modern', and the contentious association of art and commerce, already discussed in this chapter.

REFERENCES:

- 1 Paul Nash, *Outline*, 1949, (London, 1988 edition), pp92-93. In a letter to his friends Gordon and Emily Bottomley, Nash recalled his first meeting with Fry in 1913: 'I thought I knew who he was so I up & spoke to him & he was simply delightful. Of course he's the most persuasive & charming person you could ever meet. Dangerous to work with or for but a frightfully shrewd & brilliant brain and pleasant as a green meadow'. Reprinted in *Poet and Painter - letters between Gordon Bottomley and Paul Nash 1910-1946*, (Bristol, 1990), p68.
- 2 Quoted in Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, (London, 1981), p219.
- 3 Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, first published in 1968, (Omega edition, 1974), p19.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p19. By 1913 Bell considered the nucleus of Bloomsbury, to consist of Duncan Grant, Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, Saxon Sydney Turner, Vanessa Bell, Leonard Woolf, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Adrian Stephen and Maynard Keynes. (This is printed

as a diagram, *ibid.*, p15).

- 5 *ibid.*, pp12-13. Bell was defending Bloomsbury against an attack by Sir John Rothenstein found in *Modern English Painters*.
- 6 Raymond Williams, "'Bloomsbury" as a social and cultural group', from *Keynes and the Bloomsbury Group*, (The Fourth Keynes Seminar held at the University of Kent at Canterbury, 1978), edited by Derek Crabtree and A.P.Thirlwall, (London, 1980), pp40-68, p64.
- 7 Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, *op cit.*, p59.
- 8 Clive Bell was a member of the CAS committee from 1910-1917. During the early thirties Roger Fry (1910-34), Samuel Courtauld (1924-48) and Maynard Keynes (1932-46) were part of a committee of approximately 20 members consisting of several artists (Muirhead Bone plus Fry himself), but mostly of wealthy, often aristocratic, collectors and some administrators, (Campbell Dodgeson and Sir Augustus Daniel).
- 9 Quoted by Andrew Stephenson, "'Strategies of Situation": British Modernism and the Slump c.1929-1934, *The Oxford Art Journal*, number 14, (February, 1991), p32.
- 10 Marsh's influence is discussed in an essay by Frances Spalding, 'The Contemporary Art Society: Development and recognition 1920-1940'. From the exhibition catalogue, *British Contemporary Art - Eighty years of collecting by The Contemporary Art Society*, Hayward Gallery, London, December 1991-January 1992.
- 11 Nicholson had his first work purchased by the CAS in 1931 and, by 1934 this had amounted to four. All of these paintings, however, had an acceptable affinity with the *Ecole de Paris*.

- 12 Alan Bowness, in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *British Contemporary Art*, op cit., p8-9. Bowness was a committee member between 1961-9, 1970-5, and 1976-86.
- 13 Frances Spalding, op cit., p66.
- 14 John Maynard Keynes, 'The London Artists' Association - its origins and aims', *The Studio*, volume 99, (April 1930), pp235-249, p235. The three friends he refers to were the guarantors: Samuel Courtauld, Hindley Smith and L. H. Myers. They were all collectors of modern art.
- 15 For a discussion of Fry's idea of 'disinterested contemplation' see 'An Essay in Aesthetics' (first published in 1909); Bell's exposition of 'significant form' appeared in 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' in *Art*, (first published in 1914). Both of these are reprinted in *Modern Art and Modernism - a critical anthology*, edited by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, (London, 1982), pp79-87 and pp67-74.
- 16 Ibid., p81.
- 17 Clive Bell, *Art*, 1914, (OUP edition, 1987), p291.
- 18 Roger Fry, 'Art and Socialism', *Vision and Design*, 1920, (OUP edition, 1981), pp39-54, p46.
- 19 Ibid., p43.
- 20 See Chapter2, p11.
- 21 Raymond Williams, *Culture*, (Glasgow 1981), pp71-86, p80.
- 22 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, (London, 1971), p12.

- 23 Roger Fry, 'Art and Socialism', op cit., p40.
- 24 See Clive Bell, 'Victorian Taste', *Art in England*, (Penguin, 1938), edited by R. S. Lambert, pp42-46.
- 25 Quoted in Martin J. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, Cambridge, 1981, (Pelican edition, 1985), p127.
- 26 For a discussion of this idea see *ibid.*, pp127-154.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p127.
- 28 *The Studio*, volume 109, number 505, (April, 1935), pp176-185.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p176.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p183.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p183.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p179.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p183.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p183.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p185.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p185.
- 37 Raymond Williams, "'Bloomsbury" as a social and cultural group', op cit., p54.
- 38 Quentin Bell, op cit., p86.

- 39 *Ibid.*, pp85-86.
- 40 Herbert Read, Foreword to *Unit One* book, (London, 1934), p12.
- 41 *The Times*, 12 June, 1933, p10. The eleven members Nash refers to were: the architects, Wells Coates and Colin Lucas; sculptors, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth; and painters, Edward Wadsworth, Ben Nicholson, Paul Nash, Francis Hodgkins, Edward Burra, John Bigge and John Armstrong.
- 42 Herbert Read, Foreword to *Unit One* book, *op cit.*, p11-12.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p12.
- 44 Roger Fry, 'Art and Socialism', *op cit.*, p46.
- 45 Raymond Williams, "'Bloomsbury" as a social and cultural group', *op cit.*, p67.
- 46 Letter from Wells Coates to Paul Nash dated 3 March, 1933, Tate Gallery archives, TGA 9120.8
- 47 Letter from Nash to Wells Coates, dated 'March 1933', Tate Gallery archives, *ibid.*
- 48 The reviews of the Mayor Gallery show and *Important Landscapes* appeared in *The Times*, 22 April, 1933, p8, and 25 April, 1933, p8 respectively.
- 49 *Ibid.* See also his article in *The Times*, 5 May, 1933, p10.
- 50 R. H. Wilenski, *The Modern Movement in Art*, (London, 1927), p10
- 51 *Ibid.*, p163.

- 52 *The Times*, 4 May, 1933, p8.
- 53 *The Times*, 9 May, 1933, p10.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *The Times*, 19 May, 1933, p10.
- 56 *The Times*, 23 May, 1933, p10.
- 57 'What is wrong with Modern Painting', *The Studio*, volume 103, (January - June), p248.
- 58 *The Times*, 25 May, 1933, p12.
- 59 For a discussion of the CAS and the LAA see pp21-22.
- 60 *The Times*, 25 May, 1933, p12.
- 61 From Herbert Read's essay, 'Roger Fry'. Reprinted in his book of essays *A Coat of Many Colours*, (London, 1947), pp283-291, p283. He describes this essay as partly composite, deriving from articles which appeared in the *Spectator* and the *Listener*.
- 62 Letter from Nash to Moore, 17 January 1933, transcript by Anthony Bertram, Paul Nash archive, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, 86.x 26-28. Wells-Coates did not like this as it was too simple and self-explanatory. He wanted 'a word which was easy to remember, and which also indicated in some immediate sense the connecting link between the various artists.', (letter to Nash, 29 January 1933, Tate Gallery Archives, 9120.4).
- 63 Paul Nash, *Unit One* book, op cit., p79.
- 64 *Ibid.*, pp80-81.

- 65 Ibid., p89.
- 66 Letter from Read to Nicholson, dated 25 December 1933, Tate Gallery Archives, 8718
- 67 See the discussion of the series of articles from *The Studio*, 'What's wrong with Modern Painting', in Chapter 2, p10ff.
- 68 Letter from Nash to Moore, 17 January, 1933, op cit.
- 69 Letter from Burra to Nash, 10 April, 1934, Tate Gallery Archives, 795.10. Burra was the only artist who did not respond to Read's questionnaire, to produce an essay for the *Unit One* book.
- 70 Herbert Read, 'Surrealism and the Romantic Principle', written in 1936, from *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, (London, 1964), pp105-141, p109.
- 71 Ibid., p109.
- 72 Herbert Read, *Art and Industry*, (London, 1934), p36.
- 73 'Surrealism and the Romantic Principle', op cit., p126. For Read's discussion of how these artists can be considered as part of a tradition anticipating Surrealism see pp125-127.
- 74 Read's discussion of the 'peculiarly English' tradition of landscape painting is dealt with in detail in 'English Art', first published in *The Burlington Magazine*, December 1933. Reprinted in *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, op cit., pp249-268, see particularly pp262-268.
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- 76 Clive Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', from *Art*, op cit., p68.
- 77 From an article by Nash called 'Going Modern and Being British', written for *Week-end Review*, 16 July, 1932, and quoted by Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash*, (Oxford, 1980), p238.
- 78 'British Modern Art, New Exhibition in London', *The Times*, 27 January, 1937, p12.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 *The Times*, 12 May, 1934, p10.
- 81 Paul Nash, 'For But Not With', from *Axis*, January 1935, reprinted in the 'Supplementary Documents' for the Open University course (A315), *Modern Art and Modernism*, Blocks 1-13, (Open University, 1982), p77.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Herbert Read, 'Human Art and Inhuman Nature', *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, op cit., pp73-87, p87. Read describes this as a 'composite essay' and does not affix any date to it.
- 84 Ben Nicholson, 'Notes on "Abstract Art"', reprinted in 'Supplementary Documents', for the Open University course *Modern Art and Modernism*, op cit., pp77-78, p77.
- 85 Barbara Hepworth, reprinted in, *Barbara Hepworth - a pictorial autobiography*, (The Tate Gallery, London, 1985), p30.
- 86 Ben Nicholson, see 'Notes on "Abstract Art"', op cit., p78.
- 87 Ben Nicholson, *Unit One* book, op cit., p89.

- 88 Quoted by Martin Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the English Spirit*, op cit., p75.
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CHAPTER 4

Shell's role in modernizing the 'English landscape'.

Studies of British social life have indicated that since the mid-nineteenth century the importance and significance of 'the countryside' has changed and evolved.¹ The process of industrialization had the effect of shifting many people away from rural into urban areas so that: 'By 1851, more than half the population lived in towns, and England had become the world's first major industrial nation'.²

A.J.P. Taylor commented on the nineteen thirties as a time when material conditions in Britain allowed for the rise of a mass market. One of the positive outcomes he mentioned was the growing affordability of the motor-car:

...previously a diversion, now within the grasp of anyone with a hundred pounds to spare. During the decade the number of cars in private ownership increased from under two hundred thousand to over one million.³

This meant that more people than before could journey into the countryside. Oil companies, such as Shell and B.P. had an interest in stimulating car use, and were quick to spot the potential of advocating the virtues of the countryside as an indirect way of boosting sales. In the mid-thirties Shell were producing bills which covered the sides of their lorries, hailing the population to 'Visit Britain's Landmarks'. At this time there were also developments in travel by train, tube and bus and, like Shell, other advertising invited people to 'Go out into the country' (The slogan for a London Transport advertisement of 1938 designed by Graham Sutherland). The availability of public transport also opened up the possibility of commuting. Paul Nash's poster for London Transport, using the slogan 'Come out to live', used the rural suburbs as a backdrop with a circular insert in the centre focussing on London. This served to contrast the rural 'retreat' with the bustle of city life.⁴ Similarly, a Southern Electric poster offered the opportunity to 'Live in Surrey free from worry'.⁵ Even for those without cars, or who preferred to walk, the Southern Railways ran excursions and ramblers' specials to the South Downs.⁶

In whatever way people gained access to 'the countryside' there was a plethora

of publications which guided them through it. Many of the large publishers had produced these, such as Batsford's *The British Heritage Series*, which started in the thirties but continued to be reprinted through to the fifties. A significant feature of this series should be mentioned at this point, which has some bearing on typical attitudes towards the 'British' countryside. Of the twenty four volumes in print by 1951, only five volumes referred to Ireland, Wales or Scotland, and eighteen had the word 'England' or 'English' in their title. This seems to indicate that for many people 'Britishness' was synonymous with 'Englishness', and that representations of 'national identity' were based primarily around the landscape, architecture and customs of England. In an obvious sense these publications provided details and descriptions of places of interest to satisfy and guide those who had only recently gained access to 'the countryside'. But more than this the authors of these books also clearly attributed certain values to 'the countryside' and represented them as essential attributes of 'national identity'.

It seems paradoxical that an advanced industrial nation should evoke a rural past as the embodiment of its 'national character'. Marshall Berman, in an effort to understand the dynamics of modern living, provides a useful insight here. He considers the experience of modernity to entail a 'maelstrom' of continuous activity which is experienced as a 'paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity'.⁷ This thesis can be applied to Britain during the thirties. While there was substantial progress being made in terms of scientific and technological achievements, for example, there was also mass unemployment and economic and political uncertainty throughout Europe. One response to this paradox was to invoke 'the countryside' as something stable and 'British', in opposition to 'the modern' as something unstable and 'foreign'. At this time, as Weiner points out, 'Whereas Nazi Germany was being portrayed as an industrial society run amok, England was seen as just the opposite: humanely old-fashioned and essentially rural'.⁸

The travel book, *The Dorset Landscape*, published in 1935, was typical of such a search for 'national identity' through the features of the landscape. The book's introduction announced the overall intention to 'interpret the character of the English counties through their physical features'.⁹ Further on in the introduction it becomes clear that this amounts to nothing less than a search for national identity:

It is hoped by the authors that the results of their pilgrimages ... will prove both interesting and useful to the growing body of English men and women who are turning to the English countryside for recreation after the turmoil of modern town life, as well as to those more fortunate human beings who have never ceased to belong to the broad county acres which are the bedrock of England's greatness.¹⁰

It is significant that a journey into the countryside, recently made easier by the availability of transport, here becomes a 'pilgrimage' that will somehow demonstrate something of 'England's greatness'. The 'bedrock' of this greatness, it is implied, is more permanent and durable than the 'turmoil of modern town life'. As Weiner has commented, 'A characteristic of rustic visions was their stress on stability and tranquillity ... the countryside seemed to offer release from the tyranny of time's movement'.¹¹ It was as if, to use Berman's terms, 'Britishness' or 'Englishness' could exist outside the 'maelstrom' of modernity.

While in social life in general the issues concerning 'the landscape' and its relationship to 'national identity' continued, the debate also developed within the narrower ambit of art practice and criticism. The 'Nature and Art' dispute cited in a previous chapter is a striking example of this.¹² In Tonks' first letter to *The Times* he stated his allegiance with those artists who worked from 'Nature' and who represented a stable 'British' tradition. He wrote about his concern over 'the Budget, the OGPU, (and) the persecutions in Germany', implying that political and economic issues were vexing enough - he could do without being challenged on the unquestionable integrity of the 'British tradition' as well.¹³ For him, the perceived 'crisis' in art was being driven by the same destructive forces that were evident in society at large.

'The modern' is further characterised by Tonks as nihilist: a rejection of 'Nature' will lead to insanity.¹⁴ Such fears were expressed elsewhere at the time. The architect and writer, Sir Reginald Blomfield, derided the Surrealists saying that '...the end of "Modernismus" [his word for such art] is the madhouse'.¹⁵ For him the proper basis of art lay in depictions of 'the landscape':

...the sun still shines, the wind is in the sky, and there are

beautiful things in the world which man has always cared for and always will, ... it is the business of the artist to convey his ideas to us by presentations of these, and not by abstract diagrams and shapeless forms.¹⁶

It becomes clear from the comments of both Tonks and Blomfield that, in their view, some artists have *rejected* Nature. For them this is a cause for grave concern - they imply that if the artist has rejected Nature then fundamental values laying at the root of a stable society have been rejected as well. That 'the landscape' should personify such values to these writers suggests that there can be no landscape innocent of ideology.

The views of Tonks and Blomfield represent a more extreme conservative position, from which 'Britishness', embodied in 'the landscape', is defended against the attack made by modern art and modern 'ideas'. It has already been shown in the previous chapter, however, that such articulations of 'the landscape' and 'national identity' did not always originate from an extreme conservative position, and did not always involve a rejection of 'the modern'. Shell's production of posters and books in the thirties is a case in point.

The business ethos existing in Shell during the thirties is illustrated well by looking at the role of Jack Beddington, the publicity manager from 1932-39. He was chiefly responsible for the production of posters and books during this period. An obituary described him as having 'sprung from a distinguished Jewish intellectual family, of which he was proud'.¹⁷ His appointment to advertising manager was recorded by Vernon Nye, Beddington's successor:

...at a management meeting he [Beddington] had criticised Shell advertising, as being commonplace. Beddington once told me that it was as a result of this criticism that the General Manager, F. L. Halford, said to him - 'If you think the advertising is so bad you'd better take it over'. He had no previous experience of such work, having just served Shell ... in Shanghai, so he was able to bring a fresh eye and mind to the problem.¹⁸

The informality of this appointment, and the virtue accorded to dilettantism in

the operations of Shell is apparent from other comments made by Beddington's associates. One mentions Beddington's hiring of a journalist, Stuart Menzies, described as 'a brilliant amateur'.¹⁹ Elsewhere he remarks nostalgically: 'what amateurs we all were and how different things were then'.²⁰ Another writes of Beddington's advice to him when he joined his department: 'I knew nothing about advertising; but he assured me that, with a good education, that did not matter if I was prepared to work. He added that advertising was mostly a matter of common sense, judgement and taste'.²¹

The management of Shell at this time shared the values and ideals associated with a 'good education', with particular merit attached to 'individualism', 'amateurism' and 'taste'. These were the values and ideals of Bloomsbury, which in part continued to inform the avant-garde of the thirties.²² Again, in keeping with Bloomsbury there was, if not a distaste, at least an ambivalence towards the professional advertising Beddington witnessed in America. His successor, noting that 'public relations' was a more fitting title for what Shell produced, recalled:

I was sent to America immediately after the war and was told by the New York office - 'We didn't know what Beddington was talking about, and he didn't know what we were talking about'.²³

The business ethos operating in Shell was one in which dilettantism was still valued highly. In this sense Shell provide another example of what was earlier referred to as the 'gentrification of the industrialist'.²⁴

Beddington's difference from Bloomsbury, which he shared with men such as Paul Nash and Herbert Read, was a willingness to renegotiate his class values in the face of what were perceived as the new demands of the modern world. This is evident both in his attitude to art and artists as well as in his perception of Shell's 'public'. Beddington has been portrayed as both an enthusiastic collector of modern art and a sympathetic patron of young, unknown artists.²⁵ His relationship with those artists producing paintings for use as Shell posters was urbane and confident:

...once the series of lorry bills became established young artists

began to knock on Shell's door ... Beddington liked to pay a small fee in return for which an artist would experiment, doing as much or as little as he pleased. Then if an idea or picture was proceeded with a larger fee would be paid, but not usually more than £50...²⁶

This Bloomsbury informality is mediated by Beddington's pragmatic and business-like approach to commercial art. Like Nash, who was to produce both posters and a guide book for him, he believed that artists needed to adopt a 'modern', professional attitude to design:

...serious artists who start out to paint works of art, and finding either that they cannot do it, or that it does not pay if they can, wish to earn easy money in the field of advertising. For the most part they approach the job from a completely wrong standpoint. Painting easel pictures for one's own pleasure and executing commissions for men who know what they want are two very different things.²⁷

Again Beddington and Nash were alike in this respect. Both men were careful not to represent art in a reductive, utilitarian role, yet they still believed that commercial art fulfilled a particular specialist role in modern society. While such commercial imperatives were important, Beddington still acknowledged the limitations of 'design'. Such work he wrote: '...will not be inspired by passion, either religious or of any other kind, and in my old-fashioned way I still believe this to be essential to any great work of art'.²⁸ Beddington asserts here that 'higher' art, in contrast to 'design' work, is motivated by 'passion'. This elevates the former above the protean demands of commerce and re-affirms it as an essentially 'amateur' activity. Beddington's enthusiasm for commercial art and his championing of modern artists is part of a larger, more important, cultural enterprise in which the 'commercial patronage' of artists has replaced private patronage. In this endeavour Beddington admits to 'being a missionary'.²⁹

Shell's 'in-house' magazine of the time, *The Pipe Line*, exemplifies another aspect of the company's 'missionary' work. The publication was intended for the management and its contents maintain Beddington's belief that Shell were

engaged in encouraging, sustaining and defending certain cultural values and ideas. It contained information about those 'home on leave'; reports on sports events, such as fencing and rowing; on the 'literary and debating' groups; and contained regular supplements with book reviews and articles on art. On one occasion the issue for debate was 'A defence of Romanticism'.³⁰ The opening article claimed that modern art had abandoned the search for beauty and become obsessed with 'sincerity'. Subsequently, there was some response to the editor's invitation for 'readers to range themselves, through the medium of our columns, on the side of one or other of the disputants'.³¹

More important than the content of this debate, which was polite and restrained at all times, was the way in which this, and other, articles served to nurture 'civilized values' among Shell's own management. Their advertising during the thirties served the same purpose. Vernon Nye later commented that the advertisements 'had a very limited appeal and could be criticised as a form of self-indulgence but were typical of the sort of advertising Beddington liked to produce'.³² These advertisements were aimed especially at the wider upper-middle class who formed the most significant group of motor-car users: '...the first one [advertisement] would appear in *The Times*, so that the Management and Top People saw it...'.³³ Subsequently others appeared in *The Telegraph* and *The Morning Post*, and in weeklies such as *The New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, and *Weekend Review*. Nye recalled that 'no space was ever taken in the *Daily Mirror* the belief being that the readers of that paper could not afford to own or drive cars'.³⁴ The images and text used in these advertisements was often humorous and cryptic and appealed to a narrow group who shared the same taste, values and educational background. To 'understand the joke' was to confirm one's membership of the cognoscenti.

These press advertisements were clearly elitist and narrow in their function but the Shell posters, attached as they were to the sides of lorries, had a wider appeal and ambition. They were not the first company to consider seriously the role of commercial art, yet posters had been used by Shell as early as 1920, and the landscape motifs and 'modern' graphic images of the American E. Mc Knight Kauffer had been established before Beddington took over the publicity in 1932.³⁵ One of Beddington's major contributions was to use paintings by modern British artists as lorry bills.

Landscape motifs had featured in lorry bills as early as 1925 in the series 'See Britain First'. For these the paintings of D. C. Fouqueray were frequently used. They were in the late Impressionist style, and used heightened colour and loose brushwork to convey atmosphere, while often including elegant motorists amongst the scenery. Beddington's series 'Everywhere you go', which started in 1932, also focussed on the landscape and places of interest. Duncan Grant's *St Ives, Huntingdon*, of that year, with its compositional use of an arch in the foreground to frame a leisurely river scene, does not indicate any clear break with previous images, but Graham Sutherland's *Near Leeds Castle* and *The Great Globe, Swanage*; and Paul Nash's *The Rye Marshes*, all of 1932, produce images which are distinctly 'modern'. Sutherland's *The Great Globe*, and the later *Brimham Rock* (1937), part of the 'Visit Britain's Landscapes' series, feature, in turn, the sphere and the standing stone as central dominating elements of the composition. This attributes to them an importance and 'mystery' which is consistent with a developing interest in Surrealism. Nash's painting also has something of this atmosphere, created to some extent by an open, un-peopled landscape. Both artists emphasise the geometry and angularity of landscape elements thus signalling a 'modern' interest in abstraction.

Despite the use of modern artists, the Shell posters continued to appeal to an eclectic taste. The 'Everywhere you go' series, for example, included Rex Whistler's *Vale of Aylesbury*, 1933 a very traditional landscape painting. In a later series 'Visit Britain's Landmarks', which ran from 1936-37, modern works by Nash, Sutherland, Tristram Hillier and Edward Bawden, were commissioned alongside such traditional images as Lord Berners *Faringdon Folly*, 1936. Although landscape images were of central importance, there were two other series in the thirties for which Shell employed modern artists. One was the 'Conchophiles' series from 1933-38, with contributions by John Armstrong: *Artists prefer Shell*, 1933, and *Theatre-goers prefer Shell*, 1938; Hillier: *Seamen prefer Shell*, 1934 and *Tourists prefer Shell*, 1936; Sutherland: *Doctors prefer Shell*, 1934; and Nash: *Footballers prefer Shell*, 1935. The other series was called 'These people use Shell', and ran from 1938-39. The most surprising artist used was Ben Nicholson whose *Guardsman*, 1938, featured a soldier at Horseguards parade. In this painting he abandoned abstraction for an illustrative, graphic approach.

Taken as a whole Shell's advertising can be regarded as a thorough-going effort by Beddington and his team to engage with various aspects of British cultural life. Just this point was made in the catalogue of a more recent retrospective of Shell advertising:

Shell took the whole of Britain as its product. British landmarks, institutions, events, curiosities, achievements, notabilities, foibles, fancies and follies ... all serve the advertiser. This broad view justified a catholic and eclectic range of subject matter.³⁶

Beddington saw an important cultural role for Shell posters within this broad picture of 'all things British'. He wrote that:

...one of the important things about this new kind of art is that it is familiarising the public with modern movements, and gradually making critics of people who would probably never dared to criticise a picture twenty years ago.³⁷

This ambition was shared by others. Richard Guyatt, who had worked as an artist for Shell in the thirties, later wrote of this period:

We talked about commercial art and commercial artists and piously hoped that some day the hoardings would become 'the people's art gallery': Shell and London Transport posters were glittering islands in a becalmed sea of unrelieved banality.³⁸

There were two exhibitions of Shell advertising while Beddington was publicity manager: the first in 1934 at the New Burlington Galleries, London; and the second at Shell-Mex House in 1938. Both of these served to present the advertising at Shell as 'Art'. *The Times* gave favourable reviews, describing the first as a 'highly civilised exhibition'.³⁹ Kenneth Clark, by then director of the National Gallery, London, wrote a catalogue foreword to the 1938 exhibition. He praised Shell for being:

...among the best patrons of modern art. They are all that a

patron should be - they employ young or little-known artists, they provide definite subjects, and they make it possible for an artist's work to be enjoyed by a very large number of people...⁴⁰

It is evident that Shell was widely recognized as an important agent of cultural leadership during the thirties which had enabled the public to become aware of 'modern art'. But Shell also articulated a many-faceted 'British character'. This had the effect of accommodating and diffusing the excesses of 'the modern': both in terms of art and commerce. The modern British artists employed by Beddington produced images that were distinctly 'modern' in their style and handling. Yet in their context as publicity, and their focus on aspects of 'Britishness', especially the landscape, this production was remote from any developing modern art practice. What the public were seeing was not the radical edge of modern art but a more 'accessible' and parochial view. This is vividly demonstrated by Nicholson's painting *Guardsman*, a work which has little in common with his resolute pursuit of abstraction.

It was also noted earlier how Shell's role as moderator of 'the modern' could be seen in their attitude to advertising. The excesses of commerce were mitigated by an emphasis on 'public relations' rather than 'advertising' and by an identification of Shell with the 'British way of life'. 'Modern art' in this context takes on a particular inflection. It connotes 'the new' and, by association, becomes the means of inviting a sophisticated and well-informed public to buy a 'modern' product. The evocation of 'the landscape' becomes of central importance for two reasons. Firstly, its representation in a 'modern' style evokes a novel and stimulating experience homologous with the 'modern', exhilarating experience of driving. But secondly, 'the landscape' is also used to evoke the familiar and the permanent, and is used to signify the 'civilised values' associated with 'Britishness'.

The Shell Guides can be introduced as a further, and fundamental aspect of the company's production. The function of these guides was not identical with, but complementary to, the posters. Whereas the emphasis of the former had principally been celebratory and lighthearted, the latter were more didactic and conservationist. Shell had allied itself to The Council for the Preservation of Rural England at an early stage, and pledged its support for keeping unsightly

advertising hoardings out of the countryside.⁴¹ It is mentioned by Nye that during the thirties Shell joined with the Council in a series of press advertisements using the slogan 'Shell does not advertise in places like this'.⁴²

Shell's stand over conservation issues was an important one. It had the effect of reconciling the idea of the potential threat of the car as a portent of 'the modern', with that of the 'unspoilt countryside' which had become so vivid a symbol of 'tradition' and 'Britishness'. It also affirmed Shell's concerns and values as synonymous with those of 'Britain'. This was summed up in a Shell exhibition catalogue as 'What is of interest to Britain is of interest to Shell and, naturally, vice-versa'.⁴³

Beddington was responsible for the production of Shell Guides, and the account of their genesis further reflects the informality of Shell's arrangements, and Beddington's confidence that people with a similar taste and education to his could be recognized and trusted:

This was the result of an approach by John Betjeman who was then an assistant editor of *The Architectural Review*, a Glossy monthly. He brought along a very rough dummy in his overcoat pocket and Beddington persuaded Halford [Shell's General Manager], to let us try one county - Devon.⁴⁴

At one level it was obvious that the guides were for: 'People who had cars and wanted to look at things. Who else?'⁴⁵ At another level, as there had already been an increase in the publication of similar books, it could be asked, what was Shell's distinctive contribution?

In general, the Shell Guides sought to 'modernize' the genre of travel books, just as they had with their posters, in order to appeal to the upper-middle class motorist's taste for: 'something livelier and broader-minded and full of better illustrations than the old little guides...'⁴⁶ To this end artists were invited to both write and illustrate some of the guides. As Betjeman commented in his preface to the guide to Cornwall, the first of the series, in 1934: 'There are two sorts of guide book, the antiquarian and the popular'. The former, 'has ... rarely any remark to make on a building later than the reign of Charles 1', while the latter, 'gives a full

account of accommodation, bathing facilities, rambles and hotels, and sunset over the sea...'. The Shell Guide, he continued, is '...more of an anthology . The pioneer service it performs is that it draws attention within its confined limits to the many buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that have architectural merit'.⁴⁷

The guide to Cornwall included chapters covering details of amenities, such as fishing, sailing, and hunting; maps and tables; flora and fauna; Cornwall from prehistoric times; churches; 'The Cornish Language'; and 'Cornish Food'. The combination of information and anecdote, part fact and part mythology, and the general layout of the pages, provided a jaunty and substantial book for the educated tourist.

Paul Nash produced the *Shell Guide to Dorset* in 1935 in response to an invitation from John Betjeman.⁴⁸ In the book's preface Nash acknowledged his debt to Betjeman's *Cornwall*. Although in many ways the Shell guides were completely different from others Nash clearly made use of some of the standard guides when he was researching for his own.⁴⁹ Unlike Betjeman's guide, Nash wrote most of the text himself and included twelve of his own photographs and four watercolours. Despite conforming to similar chapter headings to Betjeman, Nash lends to this volume his own particular emphasis. He writes, for example, of Corfe Castle, commonly 'done to death', by considering instead the formal relationship between landscape elements: 'How often is it regarded in relation to the surrounding landscape? These aspects seem to me not only interesting historically and geographically, but aesthetically important'.⁵⁰ Nash also expresses the conviction that there is a 'poetic' quality inherent in the landscape which personifies metaphysical 'truths' concerning 'England'. He refers to 'The Face of Dorset': 'As I see it, there appears a gigantic face composed of massive and unusual features; at once both harsh and tender, alarming yet kind, seeming susceptible to moods, but, in secret, overcast by a noble melancholy - or, simply, the burden of its extraordinary inheritance'.⁵¹ In these passages Nash not only expresses an overriding concern for the 'meaning' of the English landscape but also adds a more 'modern' reference to abstraction by referring to the formal relations between landscape elements. This dominant interest in 'the landscape', informed but not displaced by 'abstract' concerns, had been observed earlier in other writing by Nash, such as in his essay for the *Unit One* book.⁵²

Nash's evocation of 'nation' in the *Unit One* essay found further expression in his Shell guide. In the case of the latter, though, it is less restrained and entreats the reader. His guide is framed with this dedication at the beginning:

To:

THE LANDOWNERS OF DORSET;

THE COUNCIL FOR THE PRESERVATION OF RURAL
ENGLAND;

THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF ANCIENT
BUILDINGS, AND ALL THOSE COURAGEOUS ENEMIES OF
'DEVELOPMENT' TO WHOM WE OWE WHAT IS LEFT OF
ENGLAND...⁵³

and at the end with this 'Exhortation':

When you go to an inn ask for English food. If you are given
badly cooked so-called French food kick up a row.

Use your influence, short of committing sacrilege, to clear the
simple and often beautiful interiors of country churches free
from the cheap colour reproductions of sixth-rate religious
paintings and other undignified rubbish occasionally to be found
there.

Use your influence by writing or speaking against the frequent
attempts on the part of jerry-builders and those bodies which
attempt to absorb whole tracts of the open countryside for their
more or less destructive activities.

Protest, if you live in a town, against all unnecessary spoliation
of period buildings.

Give your support to any or all of the Societies mentioned in the
dedication.⁵⁴

Nash's evocation of 'nation' and his campaigning tone regarding conservation had not been so clearly expressed in any previous Shell guide. In his book the forces of destruction and despoliation are represented as manifestations of 'the modern world', and he appeals for the educated upper-middle classes to campaign against all of the things which challenge the values of 'Englishness'.

John Piper's *Shell Guide to Oxfordshire* was published in 1938. Unlike Nash's volume it does not exhort the reader but it does serve as a vehicle for Piper's own cultural interests. Piper conformed to the overall aims of the series: to represent a history of events, 'traditions', cultural artefacts and English countryside, as authentically 'English'. Again, unlike Nash, Piper had not had any poster designs accepted by Shell.⁵⁵ Myfanwy Piper described Piper's initial involvement:

Sir James Richards was working at *Architectural Review* at the same time as Betjeman, and John (Piper) was writing articles for the *Architectural Review*. Richards said 'If you're looking for people to do Shell Guides you should talk to John Piper'.⁵⁶

Piper was to become editor of many of the subsequent Shell Guides.

Piper, like Nash, paid tribute to the precedent set by Betjeman's earlier volumes. The content of Piper's book is therefore broadly similar to previous Shell Guides, and he produced most of the photographs and drawings himself. It was also apparent that he, like Betjeman, felt that the 'old' guides had been biased against the buildings of the Victorian and Georgian periods, and his full and enthusiastic descriptions in the 'Gazetteer' section attest to his keen interest in a range of architecture and topography. Furthermore, the revised 1953 copy of the guide extended the 'Gazetteer' section from twenty four to forty nine pages.⁵⁷

While Nash tended to poeticise his descriptions of the landscape more than Piper, both shared the conviction that 'English' values were embedded in 'the countryside'. Piper's particular focus was on architecture and its relation to the environment. The essay by Myfanwy Piper, 'Deserted Places', and the opening sentence: 'Oxfordshire is the place for vanished magnificence' best characterised those things that informed his paintings of buildings from the late thirties onwards.⁵⁸ She wrote of country manors, hamlets, and gardens that had become

derelict and overgrown through the centuries. For her, these scenes represented the interaction of man with his environment; a cycle existed where man asserted his presence, then nature reasserted itself, and so on. While acknowledging the need for man to again work the countryside, she lamented the 'new deserts' made by thoughtless clearance and development.⁵⁹

This state of 'vanished magnificence' was echoed by John Piper and became the subject of his paintings. He wrote a few years later:

I know perfectly well that I would rather paint a ruined abbey half-covered with ivy and standing among long grass than I would paint it after it has been taken over by the Office of Works, when they have taken all the ivy off and moved in with an Atco.⁶⁰

For both John and Myfanwy Piper such scenes of 'decay' were 'Romantic' in the general sense of expressing the struggle between man and Nature. But, more particularly, they were a lament for a past, 'civilised' age being threatened by 'the modern'. Piper's war paintings of bomb-damaged buildings provided for him even more poignant images of the apparent mindlessness of 'modern' man.

It can be seen from the evidence studied above that Shell's publicity during the thirties made a significant contribution to British culture at the time. An issue arising from this concerns Nash's conviction that the 'modern', professional artist should be 'closely involved with national life'.⁶¹ In this respect Shell provided appropriate employment for artists, such as Nash, who felt this sense of 'mission'. Although Shell publicity claimed to represent the interests of 'national life' it is apparent that both those who produced Shell publicity, and the audience they were aiming at constitute a far narrower constituency. Essentially, they exemplified the ideals and values of the educated upper-middle classes.

Yet, despite Nash's entreaty that artists should be 'closely involved with national life', the publicity produced by artists for Shell and the public they catered for, formed a narrow and privileged sector of the public. Other 'realities' of national life included the high level of unemployment and the evidence of declining industries. A.J.P. Taylor wrote of the early- to mid-thirties as a time when a

minority enjoyed new luxuries, while many of the working class continued to suffer job insecurity and poor living standards:

It seemed wrong-headed and selfish for men to promote recovery by spending money on themselves, when there were still nearly two million unemployed living in harsh circumstances. This obstinate mass of unemployment and the stagnation of British exports made the nineteen-thirties 'the black decade' as much for those living in them as for posterity.⁶²

The narrow sense in which Nash's involvement with Shell as a 'professional artist' was an involvement with 'national life' is made apparent if it is contrasted with the activities of the Artists' International Association (AIA). The Association was formed in 1933 following a series of meetings involving Clifford Rowe (a painter and designer), Misha Black (a young aspiring painter), and Pearl Binder, (an illustrator). Binder also brought to the meetings James Fitton (her tutor of lithographic printing from the Central School of Art), and several of her fellow students, including James Boswell, James Holland and Edward Ardizzone.⁶³ For these artists, the majority of whom supported communist ideals, 'publicity' took the form of 'social realist' propaganda used to further the cause of the working class. In 1934 they appealed to sympathetic artists to form into 'working units, ready to execute posters, illustrations, cartoons, book jackets, banners, tableaux, stage decorations, etc.'⁶⁴

However unrealistic it might have been, the AIA were committed to revolutionary change, and art was seen by its central core of members as a weapon of class struggle in aid of the communist cause. The AIA also embodied a fundamental commitment to 'internationalism'. In the first public statement issued by the Association in 1934, they declared as one of their aims: 'The International Unity of Artists against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism and colonial oppression'.⁶⁵

Against their belief that 'publicity' should have a political and international function, some sympathisers of the AIA must have considered Nash's work for Shell to have little relevance to 'national life'. The views of William Townsend were probably typical of many other young artists, when he criticised Nash and

Nicholson for their 'pretentiousness' and presumption to be 'intellectual painters'.⁶⁶ Despite the AIA appearing to provide a focus for those artists seeking a new, more overtly political form of 'realism', it is significant to note that by the time of their show in 1935, *Artists Against Fascism and War*, exhibitors included Hepworth, Moore, Nash, Nicholson and Piper.⁶⁷ This heterogeneous mix of artists, whose political commitment was uncertain, were united only by their opposition to fascism. By this time, too, Herbert Read had become involved in a debate with AIA members over what constituted 'revolutionary art', and contributed an essay to their 1935 publication *5 on Revolutionary Art*. The other contributors were, Francis Klingender, A.L. Lloyd and Alick West (all Marxists), and the artist Eric Gill.

This brief discussion of the AIA has drawn further attention to the tension which existed in the use of concepts such as 'the modern', 'Britishness' and 'internationalism' during the early- to mid-thirties. Several different positions can be characterised here. The first is exemplified by *The Studio* and the Royal Academy for whom 'the modern' remained something to be regarded as a potential threat to national 'stability', and 'internationalism' was often associated with the 'foreign' and the 'alien'. Consequently 'Britishness' was seen as having to defend itself against 'the modern' and 'the international'.

A second position is evident from the activities of the AIA. For the Association any meaningful 'modern', 'British' art practice in the thirties had also to be 'realist'. This usually meant 'social realism' - art, that is, which often depicted working-class life, although the exhibition organized by the AIA in 1935 demonstrated the difficulty of forging such a clear 'realist' art practice. The AIA's commitment to 'internationalism' was held in tension with this narrow view of modern art practice. Their fundamental commitment to ameliorate the plight of the working-class throughout the world was grounded in a political rather than an artistic 'internationalism'.

A third position is exemplified by the art practice of Ben Nicholson who, throughout the thirties, remained committed to abstraction. His aesthetic was based on what he believed to be 'universal principles'. For him these principles were intrinsically 'international' rather than 'national'. This apparent withdrawal by Nicholson from any figurative content in his painting was seen by many as a

'failure' to register a clear commitment to 'Britishness', and a demonstration of his 'elitism' and 'foreignness'.

Lastly, there was the publicity produced by Shell which employed certain representations of 'the landscape' as typically 'British'. These were not the urban landscapes painted by William Coldstream during the thirties, who found, in the meticulous rendering of this subject some means of expressing his 'social realist' concerns.⁶⁸ Although it has been established above that 'the modern' remained an important signifier for Shell, it also becomes clear that in both the posters and guides the overriding concern was to assert 'national identity'. Consequently some forms of modern art were more readily utilised by Shell than others. The more 'extreme' abstract art, for example, found little or no place at Shell despite the claim made by Nash and Read that it was ideally suited to design matters. It has been seen that even Nicholson abandoned abstraction when designing his Shell poster. The forms of modern art most suited to Shell's purpose were those that served to 'update' quintessentially 'English' images. Thus the more critical and radical concerns of surrealism or abstraction were reduced to *styles*, and used effectively to 'modernize' the typically 'English landscape' or 'English way of life'.

The activities observed in the production of Shell publicity indicate an ambivalence towards 'the modern'. Symptomatic of this was the occasion, cited earlier, when Nash exhorted his readers to defend their 'national identity' by preserving the countryside and its traditions.⁶⁹ Here Nash's positive evocation of 'the modern', in evidence during his launch of *Unit One*, is replaced by one where 'the modern' has come to personify destructive forces out of control. This would seem to endorse Charles Harrison's judgement, cited earlier, that by around 1937 there was 'the growth of an insular and conservative tendency' in British art.⁷⁰ The evidence of this present study may even allow this date to be revised to around 1935.

Shell also succeeded in marketing a modern product while also maintaining the same disdain for 'commerce' that was a hallmark of Bloomsbury. For Shell, as for Bloomsbury, the pursuit and enjoyment of 'modern art' identified those individuals who possessed 'taste' and 'civilized values', and distinguished them from those whose concerns were 'merely' commercial.

In this chapter it has been seen how the managers and artists responsible for Shell publicity have frequently shared the ideals and values of Bloomsbury. For both the members of Bloomsbury and for those at Shell the negotiation of 'the modern' and the relationship between aesthetic and commercial values remained central issues in the larger struggle for cultural authority. In an earlier chapter Raymond Williams' analysis of Bloomsbury was considered useful for identifying its members as composing a class fraction of the dominant social group, whose influence extended through most aspects of social life.⁷¹ It is suggested here that the values and interests of those responsible for Shell publicity place them within the same class fraction.

Importantly, and again with reference to Bloomsbury, it has been seen how Clive Bell, by the mid-thirties, was emphasising the need to reassert a sense of 'national identity'. This seemed to signal some convergence with the more conservative elements of the dominant social group at a time of perceived crisis. The most obvious crisis at the time arose from the prospect of war. 'Disarmament' had been a popular banner in the early thirties for many communists, socialists and liberals in Britain to rally behind. By the mid-thirties, however, there was an increasing demand to rearm against 'the enemy' - whether this was perceived as fascist or communist. At a time, then, when national solidarity was of increasing importance it is significant that Shell's primary concern was also one of evoking 'Britishness'.

The precise relationship of Shell publicity to modern art is a complex one. By using styles of modern art to connote a 'modern' national identity it has been seen how Shell helped to promote certain artists and certain types of modern art. The emphasis tended to fall on figurative work and especially the landscape. While their influence in providing employment and encouragement for certain artists was substantial, Shell's activities were also symptomatic of a wider cultural shift towards those artists who represented the 'English' landscape. A further indication of this cultural shift was seen in the rising career of the art historian Kenneth Clark. From the early thirties to his death in 1983, he held many posts of cultural influence. These included director of the National Gallery, London (1934-45), chairman of the Independent Television Authority (1954-57), chairman of the Arts Council (1953-60), and professor of art history at

the Royal Academy (1977-83). His advocacy helped to establish and maintain the careers of many modern British artists including John Piper, Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore. In an essay on Constable written during the thirties he expressed his belief that 'the landscape' was central to the 'national tradition'. He wrote:

Constable is the most universal of our painters. He is also the most English. No one else would seem to show so clearly the way that English painting might go ... This does not mean that we must try to paint like Constable .. But there are many aspects of the English country which have not been attempted ... Indeed, it is only by studying nature with humility that we can discover our own emotions and learn to re-create them as shape and colour...⁷²

Clark encapsulates here what was to become a dominant preoccupation of many modern English artists during the thirties. Certain 'romantic' representations of 'the landscape' were to become firmly established as potent symbols of national tradition articulating the 'sensitivity' and 'humanist' values that were believed to be innate to 'English' culture.

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- 2 Weiner, *ibid.*, p47.
- 3 A.J.P. Taylor, 'The Thirties', an essay from the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Thirties: British Art and Design before the war*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, Hayward

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- 4 Paul Nash's poster was designed in 1936 and issued in 1937.
- 5 Designed by F. Gregory Brown, 1934, issued by Southern Railway.
- 6 See '*Englishness - Politics and Culture...*', op cit., p83.
- 7 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, (London, 1983), p13.
- 8 Weiner, op cit., p77.
- 9 C. G. Clark and W. H. Thompson, *The Dorset Landscape*, (London, 1935), pvii. Other books in the series covered Surrey, Devon, Dorset and Sussex.
- 10 Ibid., pviii.
- 11 Weiner, op cit., p51.
- 12 See Chapter 3, pp29-30.
- 13 *The Times*, 4 May, 1933, p8.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 'This Modernismus', a broadcast discussion in February 1935 between Eric Newton and Sir Reginald Blomfield, re-printed in *Art in England*, ed. R. S. Lambert, (London, 1938), pp135-144, p137.
- 16 Ibid., p142.
- 17 'Obituary for Jack Beddington', W. S. Mitchell, May 1959, from

- a typewritten MS held in the Shell Archives, London, p1.
Mitchell joined the publicity department in 1936 under Beddington.
- 18 Vernon Nye, 'Recollections of Shell and BP advertising'. from a typewritten MS, n.d. but thought to be c1976, Shell archives, London, p1. Nye was Beddington's successor and it is possible that this was written as an aide-memoire for the archive keeper.
- 19 Nye, *ibid.*, p2.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p14.
- 21 Mitchell, *op cit.*, p1.
- 22 This is discussed in Chapter 3.
- 23 Nye, *op cit.*, p26.
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- 25 Mitchell, *op cit.*, pp2-3.
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- 27 Jack Beddington, 'Patronage in Art To-day', *Art in England*, ed. R.S. Lambert, (London, 1938), pp86-7.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp83-84.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p85.
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- 31 From the editorial, *The Pipeline*, volume 12, number 295, 27 April 1932, pp169-170.
- 32 Nye, op cit., p15.
- 33 Ibid., p6.
- 34 Ibid., p6.
- 35 Beddington acknowledges that 'The most important pioneer of commercial art patronage in this country was the old Underground Railway under Mr. Frank Pick', 'Patronage in Art To-day', op cit., p85.
- 36 David Bernstein, from the catalogue to the exhibition, *That's Shell - that is!*, Barbican Art Gallery, July-September 1983, p4.
- 37 Beddington, 'Patronage in Art', op cit., p85.
- 38 Professor R. Guyatt, 'Fifty Years of Shell Advertising', from the exhibition broadsheet, *Fifty Years of Shell Advertising*, held at 195 Piccadilly, June-July 1969. Two of Guyatt's works for Shell were *Ralph Allens Sham Castle*, 1936 for the 'Visit Landmarks of Britain' series and *Racing Motorists*, 1939, for the 'These people use Shell' series.
- 39 *The Times*, 26 June, 1934, p12. A review of the other exhibition appeared in *The Times*, 5th July, 1938, p12.
- 40 Quoted in the exhibition catalogue, *Art in the Thirties*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, Hayward Gallery, October 1979-January 1980, p211.
- 41 A facsimile of a letter from The Design and Industries Association, appears as a frontispiece to the 1983 exhibition catalogue, op cit., dated 11th July, 1930. In part it read, 'The

Design and Industries Association desires to express its appreciation of Shell's stand against roadside advertising, and also the hope that the more enlightened public that shares our views as to Advertising on the landscape is showing its approval of your enlightened lead by giving you its patronage. We believe too that your good manners are ultimately good business'.

- 42 Nye, op cit., p13.
- 43 Bernstein, *That's Shell - that is!*, exhibition catalogue, op cit., p4.
- 44 Nye, op cit., p16. The first book was, in fact, on Cornwall, not Devon.
- 45 Myfanwy Piper, in conversation with the author, 18th February, 1993, see Appendix 2, p303.
- 46 Ibid., p303.
- 47 John Betjeman, *The Shell Guide to Cornwall*, (London, 1934), p6.
- 48 Paul Nash, *Shell Guide to Dorset*, (London, 1936).
- 49 Nash 'warmly recommends' two books in the preface of his own guide, *ibid.*, p7. These are Frank R. Heath, *Dorset*, (London, 1933); and G. G. Clark, *The Dorset Landscape*, (London, 1935). Copies of these can be found in the John and Paul Nash library, Colchester, heavily annotated by Paul Nash, with places of interest marked off.
- 50 Nash, *Shell Guide to Dorset*, op cit., p21.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p9.

- 52 This is discussed in Chapter 3, p31.
- 53 Nash, *Shell Guide to Dorset*, op cit., p9.
- 54 Ibid., p44.
- 55 Piper had a painting, *Clergymen use Shell*, 1933-35, rejected by Shell. Ted Sheppard, the Shell archivist and associate of Piper, suggested to me that one possible reason was that Beddington, being a religious man, thought it bad taste to use the image of clergymen to advertise Shell.
- 56 Transcript of conversation with Myfanwy Piper, op cit., p303.
- 57 Omitted from this later edition was the section entitled 'Twenty-nine people', otherwise the contents were the same. This 'extended gazetteer' section was to become the model for the guides while Piper remained editor.
- 58 Myfanwy Piper, 'Deserted Places', *Shell Guide to Oxfordshire*, (London, 1938), pp13-14.
- 59 Ibid., p14.
- 60 John Piper, 'Buildings in English Art', *The Architect and Building News*, 9 May, 1941, p85.
- 61 This is discussed more fully in Chapter 3, p31.
- 62 A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, (Pelican edition, 1976), p428.
- 63 A detailed account of the development of the AIA can be found in Robert Radford, *Art for a purpose - The Artists' International Association 1933-1953*, (Winchester, 1987).

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- 65 *Ibid.*, p22.
- 66 *The Townsend Journals - An artists record of his times 1928-51*, edited by Andrew Forge, (Tate Gallery, London, 1976), p35. This entry is dated 22 November 1935.
- 67 Held in Soho Square, London, 13-27 November, 1935.
- 68 During 1937-38 Coldstream, along with the artists Graham Bell and Julian Trevelyan, were employed by Mass Observation to record urban life.
- 69 See p59.
- 70 See Chapter 2, p8.
- 71 See Chapter3, pp20-21.
- 72 Kenneth Clark, 'Constable, Prophet of Impressionism', *Art in England*, op cit.,pp35-42, pp41-42.

CHAPTER 5

Circle, Axis and The Painter's Object: securing 'abstraction' for the 'modern' artist.

Three publications produced between the years 1935-37 provide evidence of the shifting allegiances among avant-garde artists and writers in Britain at that time. These were two books, *Circle* and *The Painter's Object*, both from 1937, and the journal *Axis*, published between 1935-37.¹ Taken together they illustrate the claim made in the previous chapter that a fissure was opening up between groups within the avant-garde. In addition to this, these publications provide an opportunity to examine how 'the modern' was represented in different ways. For some it was articulated around concepts such as the 'universal' and the 'international', while for others it was articulated around the 'particular' and the 'national'.

Circle exemplifies the position held by the first of these two groups. The editors of this volume were the architect Leslie Martin and the artists Naum Gabo and Ben Nicholson. Believing the word 'abstract' too vague to represent adequately their interests, Gabo, in the opening essay, used the term 'constructivism' instead:

The Constructive idea sees and values Art only as a creative act. By a creative act it means every material or spiritual work which is destined to stimulate or perfect the substance of material or spiritual life. Thus the creative genius of Mankind obtains the most important and singular place. In the light of the Constructive idea the creative mind of Man has the last and decisive word in the definite construction of the whole of our culture.²

In this passage Gabo appealed for artists to be allowed the freedom to express their 'individuality' and 'spirituality'. If artists expressed through their work the intimations of a 'higher' existence, Gabo believed, they would lead Man towards a better Society. He continued: '...it is sufficient when Art prepares a state of mind which will be able only to construct, co-ordinate and perfect instead of to destroy, disintegrate and deteriorate.'³ Although the specific cultural conditions

in which 'constructivism' was rooted had been long left behind when Gabo arrived in Britain during 1936, for English artists such as Hepworth and Nicholson, Gabo's ideas provided the theoretical basis for an art with social purpose. This represented a considerable shift from the Soviet constructivists desire to dissolve art *into* production; but by the same token it stands at some remove from conceptions of abstraction as merely decorative, or as indicative of art for art's sake. Hepworth's own contribution to *Circle* clearly echoed Gabo's when she wrote of the abstract artist's heightened intuition, so that: '...these formal relationships have become our thought, our faith, waking or sleeping - they can be the solution to life and to living'.⁴

Circle was intended to be 'international', and contributors included Piet Mondrian, Herbert Read, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Laszlo Moly-Nagy. It was also to encompass both diversity and a sense of common purpose. Diversity was addressed by dividing the book into four sections: painting; sculpture, architecture, and art and life. Common purpose would be achieved, it was anticipated, 'by placing this work side by side ... to make clear a common basis and to demonstrate, not only the relationship of one work to the other, but of this form of art to the whole social order'.⁵ The belief that there was some common aesthetic and social unity between the contributors concealed a more heterogeneous grouping. Artists such as Moore, Piper and Héliou, for example, felt no exclusive commitment to 'abstraction', despite the effort to promote 'one common idea and one common spirit'.⁶ There is some reason to maintain that this was very much an idealist project whose 'ideological base was essentially unsound'.⁷ It could also be maintained, though, that the *aesthetic* basis of internationalism at that time comes to seem like an important - if flickering - beacon.

Of especial significance to this study is the emphasis placed by the organizers, and some contributors, of *Circle*, on a specific understanding of 'Abstraction'. Hepworth, in her essay on sculpture, sought to clarify this:

'Abstract' is a word which is now most frequently used to express only the type of the outer form of a work of art; this makes it difficult to use it in relation to the spiritual vitality or inner life which is the real sculpture.⁸

Here, Hepworth appears to be trying to discriminate between work that was 'abstract' merely as a style or as an exercise in art's 'formal' language, and her own 'abstract' art practice in which she hoped to demonstrate a commitment to 'freedom' and the improvement of society.

Hepworth's concern to define her abstract work more precisely as 'constructive' serves to indicate how the term 'abstract' was, at this time, an important signifier of 'the modern', and one to be fought over. Further evidence of this can be found in the development of the journal *Axis*.

Axis first appeared in January 1935 with the subtitle 'a quarterly review of contemporary "abstract" painting and sculpture' under the editorship of Myfanwy Evans.⁹ It provided for artists and writers, both British and European, a forum for the discussion of advanced art, and was not unlike the French publication *Abstraction Création*.¹⁰ Myfanwy Piper (nee Evans) has recorded how this was an impecunious project motivated by a desire to investigate new ideas: '...even the distinguished writers like Herbert Read all contributed to *Axis* for nothing: they didn't expect to be paid for it. There was no question of reproduction fees for artists, it was enough to be publicised. That was what they needed more than anything else'.¹¹

Although *Axis* represented the only avant-garde journal of its kind in England at the time, it is apparent from the first issue that concepts of 'the modern' were being challenged. The appearance in the subtitle of 'abstract' in inverted commas signalled an ambivalence which was borne out in the leading articles. Evans' opening essay explained:

Abstract is an inadequate and misleading term, that is why it is put into inverted commas in the description of this paper. It is used as a general name for the painting and sculpture of to-day that is not naturalistic, nor surrealist, nor purely decorative. It suggests certain limits rather than defines them and is not in itself a criterion.¹²

Myfanwy Evans' effort in this article to define 'abstraction' as a set of modern

artistic concerns useful for informing work but unacceptable as the 'unwavering journey towards a catastrophic perfection not yet reached or understood by man', indicates at an early stage her incompatibility with the abstraction of Nicholson and many of the other contributors to *Circle*.¹³ In another article Geoffrey Grigson articulated Myfanwy Evans' view more distinctly. For him abstract art should provide '...not the seed to grow from, but the first floor to build upon', while the 'abstraction' exemplified by Nicholson was '...art drawing away to order, instead of advancing to order'.¹⁴ Nicholson's practice is therefore characterised by Grigson as 'remote', representing, 'An image of infinity, ordered by saying "no" rather than "yes" ... too much "art itself" floating and disinfected'.¹⁵ Grigson also believed that Fry and Bell had been responsible for stifling 'the idea of plurality' which should by nature be at the heart of English art. Henry Moore is regarded as an artist who has overcome the 'extremes' of modern art - his work is believed to demonstrate '...abstraction-surrealism nearly in control'.¹⁶

Two other articles in the first issue of *Axis* pursue further the theme of 'abstraction'. The first, Paul Nash's 'For But Not With', has already been discussed.¹⁷ In this article Nash described how abstraction provided for him only a limited means of expression. He found the particular rigour required by abstract art a useful practice for textile or industrial design, but beyond that it was only a temporary 'release' from 'representational problems'. The second article was Herbert Read's enquiry into the semantics of 'abstraction'. Here he doubted the value of the term 'abstract' if it was claimed, as it was by some, that: '...all art is *more or less* abstracted or removed from reality, and that therefore we have no right to regard this particular phase of modern art as peculiarly abstract'.¹⁸ Unlike Myfanwy Evans, Grigson or Nash he takes up a non-partisan position and claims 'abstraction' per se for the 'modern artist'. Such a strategy conforms with Myfanwy Piper's belief, expressed much later, that '...Herbert Read ... was like a grand-father to everybody ... and he didn't want to cut people off from their development'.¹⁹ Read did, however, question the wisdom of artists such as Héliou and Gabo who, by using terms such as 'concrete' may instead create greater confusion.²⁰

The evidence above suggests that there was considerable activity at this time to refine and redefine the term 'abstraction'. There were those, like Read, who wanted to maintain for all 'modern' artists a critical distance from conservatives

who might, in his view, misappropriate the term. But there were also others, such as Myfanwy Evans, Grigson and Nash, who wanted to distinguish themselves from other fragments of the British avant-garde. In the remaining seven issues of *Axis*, and subsequently in the publication of *The Painter's Object*, new alliances and antagonisms can be seen to form more clearly.

Despite the doubts already expressed in the early editions of *Axis*, 'abstraction' continued to be represented as a positive trait for the 'modern' artist. *Axis* 5, published in Spring 1936, had served as a catalogue for the exhibition *Abstract and Concrete* which the journal had co-organized. In this edition Read provided an introduction which was conciliatory in tone and urged all those with 'aesthetic sensibility' to be open-minded about abstraction, assuring the reader that: 'It is not a revolutionary stunt, not a "movement" in any political sense'.²¹

Axis 6 represented something of a turning point, signalled by Myfanwy Evans' leading article 'Order, Order!'²² Here, in contrast to Read, and more stridently than before, Myfanwy Evans expressed her concern that 'Abstraction' and 'Surrealism' were hardening into dogma.²³ A distinction was made between 'those who are primarily interested in the art of painting or the art of sculpture, and those to whom it is of secondary interest'.²⁴ To the first group Myfanwy Evans listed Picasso, Arp, Giacometti, Moore, Héliou, Hartung, John Piper, Jackson and Holding.²⁵ In the latter she placed Nicholson and Hepworth, reflecting some years later that they, '...considered themselves to have a religion, as it were, and none of the rest of us had'.²⁶

Myfanwy Evans' distinction reappears in another article in the same issue of *Axis*. St John Woods writes that Piper 'values paint before his label', and has 'returned paint to abstract painting'. 'Art', he continues, 'has chased out life and now life must come back if art is to remain'.²⁷ St John Wood introduces here another important, and distinctive, inflexion of the term abstract: those artists listed by Myfanwy Evans as interested in 'the art of painting' are seen, through the facture of their painting, to connote human involvement and activity. St John Woods believes that through their choice of subject-matter and 'personal' handling of the medium, these artists exemplify 'humanist' concerns. In contrast the work of many of the *Circle* artists is described as impersonal, as 'pure' and 'sterile' and essentially anti-humanist. This view was expressed elsewhere. *The Studio* ended

a review of *Circle* by saying:

Everyone interested in art must consider whether the process of dehumanising and materialising which it [*Circle*] represents, has not gone far enough, whether a really new cultural unity, if the world continues sane, or if culture is to be gracious instead of fearsome, will not be found in humanism.²⁸

The *New Statesman*, in an article entitled 'Anti-humanism', denounced *Circle*, and believed it to be ideologically inseparable from totalitarianism: 'I know of no spectacle more inhuman and more disgusting than the demonstrations of drill organized in Nuremberg and Moscow, of which this book shows the aesthetic equivalents'.²⁹ The antipathy shown by the Left wing press towards *Circle* indicates that such views were not the exclusive property of the conservative Right. A further example of lack of support from the Left came from the AIA. The marxist art historian Anthony Blunt felt that the abstraction of artists such as Hepworth was empty:

To praise Miss Hepworth's sculptures seem to me like saying that a man is a good orator because the shapes which his mouth makes when he speaks are aesthetically satisfying.³⁰

Although both the AIA and *Circle* shared a commitment to 'internationalism' it was clearly of a different kind. For Blunt 'internationalism' was predicated on the spread of the political revolution from Russia, while for *Circle* it was based on the idea of a global aesthetic revolution, achieved through changed consciousness. Blunt's criticism highlights the AIA's own search for a 'modern', 'revolutionary' art that is 'realist' in the sense of clearly addressing the perceived needs of the proletariat. It remained Blunt's belief that: 'The line of Daumier, Courbet, the early van Gogh, Meunier and Dalou is that of the real art of the growing proletariat, while that of the bourgeoisie continues the abstraction of the twentieth century'.³¹

The summary dismissal of *Circle* as 'anti-humanist' rests uneasily alongside Hepworth's claim that her work sought to advance 'universal freedom' and the 'freedom of ideas'.³² Gabo, too, describes the ideas informing *Circle* in terms

that can be read as 'humanist':

The main and only theme of our works is our inner impulses. We follow the vocation of these impulses to manifest the harmony and rhythm of that very current which links the human existence to the universe, and which is the source and nourishment of all human creations.³³

The response to *Circle* was not universally vituperative, although it was rarely *uncritical*.³⁴ By 1937, though, it was evident from the final two issues of *Axis* and the publication of *The Painter's Object* that substantial resistance had built up against the ideals embedded in *Circle*. Those who fully supported *Circle* affirmed the importance of concepts such as 'abstraction', 'universal values', and 'internationalism', but to those who opposed them this cluster of ideals connoted all that was 'lofty', 'impersonal' and 'anti-humanist'. *Circle* seemed to represent to some those aspects of 'the modern' that were 'foreign' and threatening.

It is apparent that many in the British avant-garde who were hostile to the ideals of *Circle* argued, instead, for 'the modern' to be located more securely within a perceived 'national tradition'. This is evident in both *Axis* 7 and 8. It can be seen in the article 'England's Climate' by Geoffrey Grigson and John Piper. Here the English 'tradition', embodied in 'the landscape', is established as essentially 'humanist' in contrast to the believed inadequacies of much modern art: 'Any Constable, any Blake, any Turner has something an abstract or a surrealist painting cannot have ... The point is fullness, completeness'.³⁵ This 'fullness' is identified with the artists's attention to 'place' as the evidence of human 'life': 'A Samuel Palmer of a barn at Shoreham, or a hillside, "means" Palmer's whole existence and surroundings, and it fixes the whole passion of his age'.³⁶

Myfanwy Evans' article on Paul Nash in *Axis* 8 uses English weather as a metaphor for 'individualism'. She opens: 'Paul Nash has absorbed the English climate. By some piece of remarkable magic he has almost *become* it'. Analogous with the variety, yet ultimate temperance, of English weather his 'Englishness' is seen to be demonstrated through his ability to reconcile the 'extremes' of abstraction and surrealism: 'Abstraction in his hands becomes a weather-gauge, surrealism the hailstones like pigeon's eggs that startle the

midlands' summer sleep...'37 Consistent with Myfanwy Evans' concern over the insidious effect of 'group morality', she applauds Nash's individualism: 'He has escaped the conditioning, ... a born, untroubled individualist'.38 Myfanwy Evans' choice of Nash as paradigmatically 'English' is an important one for the new alignment of 'English' artists - he was to become an exemplar of how 'the modern' could best be negotiated without sacrificing 'national identity'.

When *The Painter's Object* was published in 1937 this new alignment of artists was contrasted with those represented in *Circle*. Although Myfanwy Piper has commented that her volume 'was not a riposte to *Circle*', it would seem from the objectives of the book and the choice of contributors that some ideological contraposition was being taken up.39 It was Myfanwy Evans' intention that all of the writers should be artists: 'I thought that painters wrote better than critics'.40 Yet, as writers, Nicholson and Hepworth were noticeable by their absence, both from this volume and from any issue of *Axis*. Ostensibly, the contributions were diverse, though Myfanwy Piper has said of Nicholson that: 'He wasn't a writer; I was talking about articulate artists. If he had written well I would have asked him and Barbara Hepworth. They made pronouncements but they didn't write.'41 This criticism is significant not for its worth as an appraisal of the writing ability of these two artists, but for the way it denotes Myfanwy Evans' concern that *The Painter's Object* should be a celebration of 'individualism': 'It is varied, and not meant to uphold any special creed or prove anything'.42 This was irreconcilable with her perception of Nicholson and Hepworth as artists who '... wanted to change life and turn abstract art into a religion'.43

The British contributions to *The Painter's Object* represent two generations of artists. Moore and Nash, of the older, more established avant-garde, are joined by John Piper, Graham Sutherland and Julian Trevelyan. It is noteworthy that Trevelyan had accompanied Coldstream and Bell on their trip to Bolton for the Mass Observation Society and that, in his contribution to *The Painter's Object*, considers urban life.44 Unlike the 'realism' of Coldstream though, his essay looks to 'the city' as a 'mythical' structure, functioning in a way that is analogous to the human body.45 Piper, Sutherland and Trevelyan all demonstrated in their writing an interest in abstraction and surrealism, yet Myfanwy Evans believed they also showed the virtue of 'moderation': 'They don't swallow at random but choose carefully what their meal shall be before committing themselves to it.'46 John

Piper's article, 'Lost, a valuable object', complemented Myfanwy Evans' opening essay as a broad critique of 'modern art' in which many of Art's 'traditional' concerns are believed to have been travestied: 'In spite of ... varied activities here is the striking similarity of the surrealist and the abstract painter to the object: *they both have absolute horror of it in its proper context*'.⁴⁷ When Piper writes that '...it will be a good thing to get back to the tree in the field...' he reiterates a belief expressed in his earlier article for *Axis* that attention to 'the object' is the necessary condition for restoring the 'fullness' of humanism.⁴⁸

So far, *The Painter's Object* has served to provide further evidence of a distinct ideological break by a fraction of the English avant-garde. As suggested earlier, the ideas and values they embraced were nascent even as Nash announced the launching of *Unit One*, and by the time of *Axis* 6 in the summer of 1936 they were achieving greater clarity.⁴⁹ Several other persistent themes can be identified which help to locate *The Painter's Object* within a broader social and cultural nexus.

The first relates to the essays in *The Painter's Object* by English artists. Nash, Piper and Sutherland all take particular places or objects as the subjects of their articles and represent them as tokens of 'individualism' and 'imagination'. This is sometimes commingled with 'tradition', 'mystery' and 'permanence' by locating them in the past, and sometimes in a pre-historic age.⁵⁰ Nash's article 'Swanage, or Seaside Surrealism' is consistent with his *Shell Guide to Dorset* and rehearses further his anxiety over the desecration of the English countryside. He also allows himself to entertain a romantic sense of unease when viewing the town: '...apart ... from its superb natural setting, its quarry landscapes and the lovely bay, Swanage has a strange fascination, like all things which combine beauty, ugliness, and the power to disquiet'.⁵¹

The essays by Sutherland and Piper are also commensurate with the subjects and concerns of the *Shell Guides*. Piper's 'England's Early Sculptors' echoes closely his writing in the *Guides* where he sees in the sculpture of the middle ages evidence of 'English' genius, vitality and originality. Sutherland, like Nash, allows the landscape to appeal to his surreal sense of disquiet and mystery. His essay on the pre-historic stone circle, 'An English Stone Landmark', ends with the words: 'Melancholy, impressive and integral such as this, is the basis of

sculpture'.⁵² It is illustrated with a photograph of Brimham Rock, in Yorkshire, the subject he chose for a Shell poster.

There is evidence that those responsible for producing *The Painter's Object* and the posters and books for *Shell* shared many of the same interests and values concerning the significance of the English countryside. It is also apparent that this same group of people perceived the need to re-negotiate the status of the 'amateur' and the 'professional'. The equivocal relationship to Bloomsbury is shared in the sense that the notion of the disinterested amateur portrayed by Bell and Fry had become, by the thirties, synonymous with 'aloofness' and a lack of engagement with the 'real world'. The younger avant-garde artists, responding to the social conditions of the time, adopted the role of the 'professional' to publicly distance themselves from such criticism, and in an effort to attract work as designers.⁵³ John Piper wrote in *Axis* that 'Painting itself badly needs the professional now ... the amateur is the public's love', a sentiment expressed in *The Painter's Object* by Myfanwy Evans: 'Almost one could buy a tame artist at Fortnum and Mason's; ... its really easy...'.⁵⁴ Myfanwy Piper has reflected on artists such as Nash, Piper and Sutherland who worked for Shell: 'I don't think at any point they thought of themselves as amateurs. They were professionals who had the experience to be useful'.⁵⁵ Still, an ambivalence existed in this relationship between artist and public.

Paradoxically, while in one sense establishing their separateness from the 'old guard' this younger avant-garde retained, in another sense, something of the ideal of 'the amateur'. This was necessary to maintain a critical distance from those artists associated with The Royal Academy, and from those editorials which appeared in *The Studio* exhorting modern professional artists to respond to public demand.⁵⁶ Myfanwy Piper's insistence on the priority of 'the artist' signals her belief that they should ultimately be immune from such exigencies: '...designers should always refer and defer to artists and not the other way round' and 'designers who were also painters should always keep their painting as the inspiration'.⁵⁷ This would seem to encapsulate for Myfanwy Piper the real meaning of 'the amateur' which she believed had become debased: "'Amateur" has lost its old [sense] of meaning [an] admirer or knowledgeable lover of something'.⁵⁸ 'The amateur' thus remained for both those responsible for the cultural production at Shell, and for Myfanwy Evans and artists such as Nash and

Piper, and important emblem of distinction from the utilitarian interests associated with the broader middle and upper classes.

Another persistent theme in *The Painter's Object* was the articulation of the 'international' and its relationship with 'Englishness'. Contributions to the volume from European avant-garde artists such as Léger, Héliou, Ozenfant, Kandinsky, Ernst, Picasso, de Chirico and Moholy-Nagy, along with the American, Alexander Calder, demonstrated a genuine interest in international developments. However, the leading essay by Myfanwy Evans, indicates her belief that while 'the modern' in all its 'international' varieties was to be recognized and learned from, at the same time it was a priority to maintain the distinctiveness and 'individualism' of being 'English'. She discussed how artists needed to attend to the concerns and problems of their own country while, at the same time, desisting from any overtly 'political' intervention in their work: 'Moore's way, Nash's, Héliou's, Léger's, Trevelyan's ... They all have different ways and means, there are scarcely two artists whose formal means are alike in this book...'⁵⁹

This advocacy of 'individualism' rooted in the 'English' character which John Piper traces in his own essay from *The Painter's Object* shares common ideological ground with Clive Bell who, when he wrote of the need to reassert 'national tradition' in 1935, argued for a more narrowly defined and parochial understanding of 'internationalism'.⁶⁰ In this respect both Bell's position as a leader of the 'old guard' of Bloomsbury, and *The Painter's Object*, as symptomatic of a 'new alignment' of artists and writers, now seemed more difficult to distinguish from the more conservative tenor of editorials in *The Studio*.⁶¹

The links between the various interest groups are complex and it has been discussed above how tension existed as groups marked out their difference from each other. Myfanwy Evans, John Piper, Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland were central figures both in the 'new alignment' of artists characterised by *The Painter's Object* and in the group who were producing books and printed ephemera at Shell. It has been evident throughout the foregoing discussion how groups frequently established their different positions by contesting the same key values, such as 'freedom', 'humanism', and 'individualism'. Perhaps the

evidence of this contest of values within the narrower sphere of art can be usefully placed in a wider context. It is apparent that during the thirties values such as these were being articulated in the wider debate over the future of liberalism. Two writers provide useful testimony of this: the first is the historian George Dangerfield, and the second the poet and critic Stephen Spender.

Dangerfield's book *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, was published in 1935. For him, by the outbreak of the first world war the Liberal Party was effectively dead:

I realize, of course, that the word 'Liberal' will always have meaning so long as there is one democracy left in the world, or any remnant of a middle class: but the true pre-war Liberalism - supported, as it still was in 1910, by Free Trade, a majority in Parliament, the ten commandments, and the illusion of Progress - can never return. It was killed, or it killed itself, in 1913. And a very good thing too.⁶²

One of the principal failures, according to Dangerfield was the failure of the middle-classes, despite their altruistic tendency, to do anything much in the face of growing demands from the working class for better wages and conditions. He characterised liberals as 'a kind of capitalist left wing', describing them as having 'advanced upon social reform with noisy mouths and mouselike feet'.⁶³

In 1937 Stephen Spender wrote a book for the Left Book Club called *Forward from Liberalism*.⁶⁴ There he discussed what he believed to be the honourable aspirations of all liberals, but, like Dangerfield, spoke of their profound failure to achieve any of them:

Liberals are blind to the fact that liberal justice, liberal freedom, liberal individualism, rest on the institution of property and the interests of a certain class. As a result of this deliberate blindness a fatal ambiguity has crept into liberal philosophy, so that all liberal concepts, whilst they mean what they say, also mean their exact opposites. In liberalism, political freedom means economic bondage, freedom of the individual means

suppression of individuals, free trade means unbridled exploitation.⁶⁵

For Spender the thirties represented something of a watershed for liberal values - they were under threat from two directions. The first was from fascism, and the second from the fatal compromise of liberal values with liberal politics. He wrote:

It is evident that the liberal democratic state cannot survive in its present form; the pressure of war, economic crisis, public disappointment, is too great; its leaders must choose between the interests of financial oligarchy and the disinterested ideal of democratic freedom. Since liberal democracy is pledged to protect the sanctity of private property, it is fairly evident which path liberal democracies will take.⁶⁶

Both Spender and Dangerfield provide useful testimonies of the general political and cultural climate in Britain during the thirties where liberal values were being shaken. But Spender puzzled over one other important element - what was to be the way forward for liberals? He described two possible routes. The first he called the 'romantic evasion':

The world against which the romantics protested has come into being: so that romanticism to-day, appealing to the imagination against a deluge which has already taken place, instead of being a protest, has become evasion, assent, reaction. The reactionaries turn back to an earlier age where they can indulge their visions of Empire, war, religion, unspoiled country...⁶⁷

The second, his preferred route, was communism:

I am a communist because I am a liberal ... communism or international socialism becomes an immediate necessity: it is not too much to say that without it our civilization cannot survive.⁶⁸

The first route was, for Spender, wrong-headed, while the second provided the

only way forward. At the heart of both, however, was the liberal concern to preserve 'civilization'. Spender believed in the 'civilizing' function of art and wrote of the relationship between poetry and the realization of liberal values:

Poetry does not state, it conditions truth ... Thus the poetic truth working through the poetic logic, does not propagate an impulse, it plants a seed, a little nucleus round which other truths collect.⁶⁹

Spender applauded the efforts of the Surrealists and their ongoing project to expose 'truth':

Finally they [the Surrealists] will find themselves in possession of an entire language of symbols, all of which have a deep significance reaching back to the womb and forward to death, breaking down all the assertions of personality and individualism.⁷⁰

One thing Spender was clear about was that, in his view, art, or specifically poetry in his case, should never serve as an instrument of propaganda. Art should retain its autonomy by providing a unique aesthetic experience on its own terms. In this way art provided a certain kind of 'truth'.

Although Spender did not discuss what he regarded as an effective modern art practice in Britain, it might be useful to speculate on this in the context of the present study. In many ways those artists and writers (and their patrons and employers) who were central to the publicity at Shell and the production of *The Painter's Object* correspond with the route Spender defined as 'romantic evasion'. Their activities concur with Spender's belief that this form of liberal reaction usually involved a search for 'national identity' and an invocation of 'the countryside' and 'tradition'. It would seem that the artists closely associated with the AIA best fit Spender's ideal in terms of political aims. Yet would the Association have fulfilled his criteria of aesthetic autonomy or 'truth', or would their art have merely seemed propagandist? Would their 'internationalism' based on politics rather than aesthetics, and their concern for 'Britishness', have appeared to Spender as hopelessly conservative? Perhaps Spender would have

been disposed to those artists and writers gathered around *Circle* for their effort to address the possibility of social change. Perhaps he would have seen value in their project of defining an 'international' aesthetic which could express universal 'truth'. Or would Spender, like many others, have seen their work as too idealistic and 'lofty' to be effective?

It appears that a practice fulfilling Spender's prescription is not easily located. Perhaps this is not surprising bearing in mind the ideological struggle that appeared to be taking place at the time. The fact that Spender offers no solutions, only ideals and aspirations, suggests that he, too, was experiencing the same sense of struggle. In the final analysis, perhaps his essay is best read as another symptom of the crisis he is describing. Despite these reservations, though, Spender's testimony remains useful. Perhaps it enables the fragmentation affecting modern art practice in Britain during the mid- to late-thirties to be situated within the context of this wider crisis of liberal values. Spender's witness to a 'crisis of values' during the thirties in the wider cultural and political spheres both confirm and illuminate the ideological struggles that have been observed in the narrower sphere of art. His analysis has resonance with the foregoing discussion of contemporary debates about 'good' modern art, where a tension has often been seen to exist between key concepts such as 'nationalism', 'internationalism' and 'modern art'. These concepts were clearly circulating in the ideological currents of the time and provided important foci in the wider contest over liberal values.

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- 2 This is quoted from an edited version of the essay, 'The Constructive Idea in Art', reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford, 1992), pp365-368, p366.

- 3 Ibid., p367.
- 4 Barbara Hepworth, 'Sculpture', quoted from *Art in Theory*, op
cit., pp374-377, p377.
- 5 *Circle*, op cit., editorial, pvi. This was written by Gabo, perhaps
as a demonstration of his leadership.
- 6 Ibid., editorial, pvi.
- 7 For a discussion of this see Charles Harrison, *Modern Art and
Modernism*, op cit., pp286-287.
- 8 Barbara Hepworth, 'Sculpture', op cit., p376.
- 9 Myfanwy Evans later married John Piper, and is also referred to
in this text as Myfanwy Piper.
- 10 Myfanwy Piper has said: 'I did it because I went to Paris and I
met Jean Hélion, and he had just attached himself to *Abstraction
Création*, ... and he said "what you should do is to go back to
England and start a magazine" ... I said that somebody like
Herbert Read should be doing it, and he said that I was young
enough to have a failure but Herbert Read wasn't', Myfanwy
Piper in conversation with the author, 18 February, 1993,
appendix 2, p300.
- 11 Ibid., p299.
- 12 Myfanwy Evans, 'Dead or Alive', *Axis*, number 1, (January,
1935), pp3-4, p3.
- 13 Ibid., p4.

- 14 Geoffrey Grigson, 'Comment on England', *Axis* 1, *ibid.*, pp8-10, p8.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p10.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p10.
- 17 See Chapter 3, p35.
- 18 Herbert Read, 'Our Terminology', *Axis*, number 1, *op cit.*, pp6-8, p7.
- 19 Conversation with Myfanwy Piper, *op cit.*, p302-303.
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- 21 Herbert Read, 'Abstract Art. A Note for the Uninitiated', *Axis*, number 5, (Spring, 1936), p3. *Abstract and Concrete* had been co-organized with Nicolle Gray and was shown in Oxford, Liverpool, Cambridge and London during February-April, 1936.
- 22 *Axis*, number 6, (Summer, 1936), pp4-8.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p5. At a later date Myfanwy Piper said she felt that Read's liberal attitude to all modern art 'sometime got [him] into deep ideological water', from a conversation with the author, *op cit.*, p303.
- 24 *Axis*, number 6, *op cit.*, p5.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p8.
- 26 Conversation with Myfanwy Piper, *op cit.*, p300.
- 27 St. John Woods, 'Time to forget ourselves', *Axis*, number 6, (Summer, 1936), pp19-21, p21.

- 28 *The Studio*, volume 114, number 536, (November, 1937), p227.
- 29 *New Statesman*, volume 19, number 336, 31 July 1937, p190.
- 30 Anthony Blunt, 'Specialists', *The Spectator*, number 5704, (22 October, 1937), p683.
- 31 Anthony Blunt, 'The realism quarrel', *The Left Review*, volume 3, number3, (April 1937), pp169-171.
- 32 Barbara Hepworth, 'Sculpture', op cit., p377.
- 33 Naum Gabo, 'Constructive art', *The Listener*, volume 16, number 408, (4 November, 1936), pp846-848, p847.
- 34 See, for example, *The Listener*, volume 18, number 447, (4 August, 1937), pp259-260, and *Burlington Magazine*, volume 121 (1937), p246.
- 35 *Axis*, 7, (Autumn, 1936), pp4-9, p6.
- 36 Ibid., p6
- 37 Myfanwy Evans, 'Paul Nash, 1937', *Axis* 8, early Winter 1937, pp12-13, p12.
- 38 Ibid., p13. Myfanwy Piper spoke in retrospect of Nash's involvement with *Unit One*: 'Though Nash had many ideas for artists to help themselves by working together he never saw it as a group behaviour - but like-minded individuals associating', in conversation with the author, op cit., p299.
- 39 Ibid., p305.
- 40 Ibid., p305.

- 41 Ibid., p305.
- 42 Myfanwy Evans, 'The Painter's Object', *The Painter's Object*, op cit., p13.
- 43 Conversation with Myfanwy Piper, op cit., p306.
- 44 See Chapter 4, reference 68.
- 45 Julian Trevelyan, 'Mythos', pp59-61. Reproductions of two of his works accompany the essay. One demonstrates an interest in cubist collage, the other an interest in the surrealism of Joan Míro.
- 46 Myfanwy Evans, *The Painter's Object*, op cit., p10. For example, Moore's article 'Notes on Sculpture', (also published as 'Sculpture' in *Art in England*, edited by R. S. Lambert, London, 1938, pp93-98), contained this statement: 'The violent quarrel between the abstractionists and the surrealists seems to me quite unnecessary. All good art has contained both abstract and surrealist elements...', pp21-29, p28.
- 47 *The Painter's Object*, op cit., pp69-73, p70.
- 48 See reference 35 for details of John Piper's earlier article for *Axis*. Myfanwy Piper said that John Piper '...used the "tree in the field" as Cézanne might have chosen the "apple in the dish", suggesting that attention to the substantiality of 'the object' represented 'fullness', (conversation with Myfanwy Piper, op cit., p306).
- 49 Nash's commitment to 'national identity' and his ambivalence towards some of the implications of 'abstraction' are discussed in Chapter 3.
- 50 See, Paul Nash, 'A Nest of Wild Stones', pp38-42, and 'Swanage,

- or Seaside Surrealism', pp108-116; John Piper, 'England's Early Sculptors', pp117-126; and Graham Sutherland, 'An English Stone Landmark', pp91-93, *The Painter's Object*, op cit.
- 51 Ibid., p115.
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- 53 Nash's efforts to promote the 'new professional' are discussed in Chapter 3, see particularly pp30-31.
- 54 John Piper, 'England's Climate', *Axis*, 7, op cit., p6; Myfanwy Evans, 'The Painter's Object', *The Painter's Object*, op cit., p4.
- 55 Conversation with Myfanwy Piper, op cit., p304.
- 56 See, for example, 'Is the Painter in touch with life?', *The Studio*, volume 109, (June, 1935). The article suggests that artists could produce 'A brochure which brought to one's notice the advantages of having one's portrait painted, or of completing a decorative scheme with a well-chosen landscape...', p295.
- 57 Conversation with Myfanwy Piper, op cit., p299.
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- 59 Myfanwy Evans, 'The Painter's Object', op cit., p10.
- 60 John Piper, 'England's Early Sculptors', op cit., p10. Clive Bell, 'What Next in Art', *The Studio*, volume 109, number 505, (April, 1935), pp176-185. Bell's essay is discussed in Chapter 3, pp25-26.
- 61 *The Studio's* attack on 'internationalism' against the virtues of 'nationalism' is particularly trenchant in the series 'What is wrong with Modern Painting', volume 103, January-June, 1932.

This is discussed in Chapter 2, pp10-11.

- 62 George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, (London, 1935). This extract is taken from the 1961 edition, (Capricorn Books, U.S.A.), pviii.
- 63 Ibid., p15.
- 64 Stephen Spender, *Forward from Liberalism*, (London, 1937).
- 65 Ibid., pp83-84.
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- 68 Ibid, pp202-203.
- 69 Ibid., pp197-198.
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CHAPTER 6

Pessimism and optimism in post-war Britain.

The start of the second world war in 1939 marked the end of a decade in British cultural life that had contained some spirited debate about avant-garde art practice. Ben Nicholson's departure from London for Cornwall in that year could be taken as symbolic of the fact that such debates had become dissipated and largely irrelevant in the face of war. During the war years Paul Nash, Henry Moore, John Piper and Graham Sutherland were employed by the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC). Under the direction of Kenneth Clark the WAAC operated between 1939-1945 collecting 5570 pictures from over 300 artists who had been commissioned to document the war.¹ Abstract artists found no place in this selection. Clark commented:

The War Artists collection cannot be completely representative of modern English art, because it cannot include those pure painters who are interested solely in putting down their feelings about shapes and colours, and not in facts, drama, and human emotions generally. For this reason it contains no work by such distinguished painters as Matthew Smith, Frances Hodgkins, Ethel Walker, Ivon Hitchens, Ben Nicholson and Victor Pasmore. It would be a pleasure to see the names of these fine painters among those of the War Artists, but it is very doubtful if they would do as good work on war subjects as they are continuing to do on the subjects which they have made their own.²

Clark's comment conceals the fact that artists were selected on the basis of their perceived importance to the preservation of 'English art'. His comment also implies that abstract art was seen by him as less worthy of preservation because it was *less* 'British' or even 'un-British'. When he first approached the Ministry of Information in August 1939 to suggest the forming of the WAAC he had stressed the need: 'Simply to keep artists at work on any pretext, and, as far as possible, to prevent them from being killed'.³ Artists themselves sensed that they had been 'selected'. As Graham Sutherland commented: 'One cannot escape the fact that some of us were protected'.⁴

The effect was that some British artists were accorded a certain financial and personal security that was denied to others. It is significant that the aesthetic preferences Clark exercised during the war are congruent with other influential accounts of British art written in the immediate post-war period. For the artist and writer Robin Ironside the future of successful British art was exemplified in work he regarded as 'neo-romantic'. In a book published by the British Council in 1947, when he was also Assistant Keeper at the Tate Gallery, he expressed the same preferences as Clark in almost identical terms:

It is the broad truth that British painting since 1939 has accomplished, or almost accomplished, the revival of a liberal conception of art as a creative instrument for the communication, not simply of those specialized emotions that the felicitous arrangement of forms and colours may arouse in us, but also for the communication by imagery, whether the imaginative vision be naturalistic or not, of any emotion whatever.⁵

With this advocacy after the war of 'modern', 'figurative', 'British' art there appeared to be little change from the predominant attitudes that had been developing since the mid-thirties. As already argued this can reasonably be described as conservative in its emphasis on 'traditional' concerns.⁶

This tendency towards conservatism was rooted in a more general pessimism towards the cultural, moral and spiritual health of 'civilized' societies in the post-war world. In 1945 Cyril Connolly wrote in terms of generalised despair: 'The great marquee of European civilization in whose yellow light we all grew up and read or wrote or loved or travelled has fallen down...'⁷ Writing a few years earlier, during the war, George Orwell appeared to identify in 'the modern' world a loss of respect for 'individuality' and the emergence of a barbaric 'mass' mentality. This led him to claim that although the ruling class in Britain may be stupid, and their power iniquitous, yet they were '*morally* fairly sound', [Orwell's emphasis].⁸ He distanced the 'British' from 'the modern', concluding that: '... the British ruling class had their points. They were preferable to the truly modern men, the Nazis and Fascists.'⁹

The above discussion suggests that critical positions taken up towards modern art also tend to articulate attitudes towards the morality and politics associated with 'the modern' in general. This can be illustrated with reference to an exhibition of work by Picasso and Matisse held in London after the war.¹⁰ As if preempting the controversy to come the Director of the V&A, Leigh Ashton wrote a disclaimer to *The Times* explaining that the exhibition should rightly have been held at the Tate Gallery, but the ill-repair of the buildings had made this impossible. He pointed out that:

...in acting as host to these distinguished visitors, I would wish to remind the public that we are only hosts, and that the officers of this museum, whatever their private interests in the subject of modern oil-painting may be, have no official status in the matter. Correspondence on the subject will not, in consequence be dealt with, and should be referred to the British Council...¹¹

Picasso's painting *Pêche de nuit à Antibes*, was seen by *The Daily Telegraph* as 'The chief exhibit'.¹² It was much larger than any other picture in the exhibition and exemplified the modern tendency to treat the figure in bold simplified shapes that were flattened out and fragmented across the picture surface. In searching for some precedent for this work Christian Zervos, in the exhibition catalogue, commented that *Guernica* was the turning point from which this work flowed.¹³ Initial reviews were not hostile. *The Daily Telegraph* reported of Picasso's work that, '...no one could claim that their effect is agreeable. Yet their power cannot be denied'.¹⁴ *The Times* commented that, '...the artist's grasp and sense of design are as astonishing as ever...'¹⁵ By contrast Matisse's paintings were seen as uncontroversial.

The caution of these initial reactions provided no indication of the lay response that was to follow in both *The Times* and *The Telegraph*.¹⁶ As suggested above, it appears that this particular exhibition of modern art came to exemplify for many people those things that were seen to be wrong with 'the modern' in general. The work was denounced as a 'hoax', and an 'insult both to artists and the intelligent public'.¹⁷ Others focussed more clearly on what they saw as an example of 'the foreign' and 'the modern' affronting 'the English'. Some in their

haste to distance themselves from the work, asked how 'the hard-earned taxpayer's money' had been allowed to fund this show.¹⁸ In response Malcolm A. Robertson, a former Chairman of the British Council, pointed out that the French Government had paid for it.¹⁹ More significantly, having set the record straight, he went on to make his own position clear, saying that such paintings are 'the phantasmagoria of a tormented mind and a bilious eye or, alternatively, the antics of uproarious jesters'. Like others, he suggested the 'un-Englishness' of the work, believing that the show enabled us to '...slowly acquire some insight into the taste and mentality of people different from our own'.²⁰ This sentiment is expressed in more direct terms by two correspondents from the journal *The Athenaeum*: 'We cannot ... feel that the invasion of the Victoria and Albert Museum by the work of two contemporary foreign painters of highly disputable merit is justified'.²¹

The use of the word 'invasion' expresses something of the threat that such 'modern art' was seen to present to 'Englishness', but the conflation of 'modern art' with 'fascism' is more explicit and ingenuous elsewhere. Evelyn Waugh believed the exhibition to augur a loss of control as people 'are genuinely "sent"'. 'Modern art', he wrote, 'whether it is Nazi oratory, band leadership, or painting, aims at a mesmeric trick and achieves either total success or total failure'.²² On the opening day of the exhibition the *Daily Mail* drew a cruder analogy:

A Spaniard and a German provide this morning's problem for the 8.30.

Both these pictures reached the *Daily Mail* office last night. One is a *Woman in a Green Costume* from the 25 paintings by Pablo Picasso, Spanish artist now on show at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington. The other is a snap of 'doodles' made by Göring during the war crimes trial at Nuremburg.

Which is which?...²³

That Picasso should be associated with fascism is particularly ironic given the reasons for the exhibition's origins. Picasso had remained in Paris throughout the war and continued to work even while the city was occupied by enemy forces. During October 1944, the French government honoured him with a one-man show in Paris at the Salon d'Automne, retitled for the occasion the *Salon de la*

Libération. Contrary to the connections that were made in this country between the 'modern' art of Picasso and totalitarianism, the French government saw the artist and his work as signifying 'individuality' and 'freedom'. Picasso had just joined the French Communist Party, and he too represented his work in terms of a moral crusade:

For I am proud to say, I have never considered painting as an art of simple amusement, of recreation; I have wished, by drawing and by colour, since those are my weapons, to reach ever further into an understanding of the world and of men, in order that this understanding might bring us each day an increase in liberation...²⁴

The vehemence shown towards Picasso both in the 'quality' and tabloid newspapers in Britain indicate how potent his work had become as a signifier of 'dangerous', 'foreign' ideas. Picasso had come to signify among other things 'fascism', 'totalitarianism' and 'insanity'. By extension his art was seen as a manifestation of all the perceived ills of 'the modern' world. Yet, in contrast, he was regarded by the French government as a hero. This testifies to the range of 'meanings' that can be attributed to art. It seems as though the 'meaning' of Picasso's work at the time was determined by the highly contingent 'external' agenda of whoever was doing the valuing.

George Orwell's critical position, discussed earlier, needs raising again here. It is difficult to dissociate entirely his views concerning the connection between 'the modern' and 'fascism' from those of Evelyn Waugh. Yet there is no reason to believe that Orwell would have had any sympathy for Waugh's Right wing views on art or society in general. Rather, it could be suggested that this conflation of 'the modern' and 'fascism' is symptomatic of the way that some on both the political Right and Left invoked 'the modern' as a signifier of any perceived 'threat' to 'Britishness'.

The *misrepresentation* of Picasso's work at this time as 'modern' in all the pejorative senses discussed above, indicates how intent some people were to clearly demarcate 'Britishness' from 'foreignness'. It also demonstrates that those moral and spiritual values believed to underpin the social fabric were also felt to

be at stake when modern art was being discussed. This latter point is evident from the view of one correspondent to *The Times* who wrote: '...this type of art is a symptom of the disintegration of our present form of civilization...' ²⁵ William Coldstream, whose own 'realist' work of the thirties involved the rejection of certain forms of modern art, saw the exhibition as an effective 'emetic' after which: '...an antidote is easily found (in) the superb collection of masterpieces on view in the National Gallery'. ²⁶ Residing in this collection, he implies, would be the means of recovering that 'tradition' and those 'civilized values' for which Britain has some guardianship.

Picasso's London show had provided, for both art specialists and non-specialists who were critical of it, evidence of the excesses of 'the modern' and of the need to restore the 'civilized values' of 'Britishness'. Some critical support for this position came from an unexpected quarter: not from those who were anti-modern, or who disliked Picasso, but from art critics who nevertheless shared with Picasso's detractors the same pessimism about society. Robin Ironside's book of 1947, already referred to, illustrates this point. He characterised the period in which he was writing as one where, 'hopes of spiritual safety are perilous'. ²⁷ His attitude towards modern art, though, was one of negotiation rather than outright dismissal. He acknowledged, for example, the contribution of Roger Fry in introducing the 'indispensable terminology' of modern art, but added that in Britain there is a 'strong natural reaction against the purism of Fry's critical doctrines'. ²⁸

Ironside's use of the word 'natural' is a telling one. Throughout his book he regarded certain characteristics as innately 'British'. He asserted that twentieth century continental art had been of value to British art through the updating of ideas and techniques of painting, but 'the modern' had met with a durable and resistant 'native' British character. One of the main features of this character was the centrality of landscape motifs, and their essentially 'lyrical' treatment: '...the configuration of the soil, the contours of the woods, the inexhaustible variety of the English light, have never been successfully used as the mere pretext for a telling assembly of colours or interplay of projections and recessions'. ²⁹ Another feature was the importance of the 'amateur stimulus': 'The truth may be that all great art is the fruit of an original impulse transcending the mere professional, not to say the vocational interest...' ³⁰ This delineation of Britain's 'native character' is

strikingly similar to the one made in Myfanwy Evans' pre-war collection of essays, *The Painter's Object*, discussed in the previous chapter.³¹ It perhaps indicates the continuing authority of those who asserted that 'Englishness' was inherent in this particular conjunction of 'landscape', 'romanticism' and 'amateurism'. It also suggests how, from the critical position occupied by Ironside and Evans, certain forms of abstract art could be regarded as 'un-English'.

Of central importance to both Ironside and Evans was their attitude to abstraction. Such art, Ironside wrote: 'involves preoccupations too theoretic for widespread or faithful acceptance by a native culture that has at all times shown an almost instinctive preference for empirical philosophies'.³² By implication, Ben Nicholson's work is thus considered too 'foreign' and ultimately 'barren'.³³ Consistent with Evans' advocacy of John Piper, Ironside also saw him as representative of a native resistance to abstract art and, 'by temperament most in tune with the national heritage'.³⁴

So far in this chapter it is the pessimism expressed over cultural, moral and spiritual matters that has been observed. To some extent this can be contrasted with a sense of optimism which existed at the same time concerning the material and economic conditions in post-war British society. A.J.P. Taylor described how, during the war, unemployment fell and new industries were created: 'No one in 1945 wanted to go back to 1939. The majority were determined to go forward and were confident that they could do so'.³⁵ The Labour government, elected in 1945, began to introduce social and economic changes based on the ideas of Beveridge and Keynes. The Welfare State, established at this time, offered an unprecedented level of social security and, between 1946 and 1948, the Bank of England, the coal mines, electricity, gas and the railways were all nationalised. These changes promised a new social democratic state based on the principle of 'collective consumption'.³⁶ Andrew Gamble notes that by 1951 there was good cause for optimism: 'A measure of the success of reconstruction was the fact that Britain still accounted for 25 per cent of exports of world manufactures'.³⁷

Underlying this optimism, however, was a prevailing anxiety about America. The 'spectre' of America was not new in Britain and dated back at least as far as the middle of the nineteenth century, but in the immediate post-war period it

took on a distinctive character.³⁸ In general terms this can be described as concern over America's claim to 'lead' the world. Leadership was seen to be at stake in two inter-related spheres: the economic, military and political; and the cultural.

America's superiority in the the first of these was difficult to refute. Andrew Gamble writes: 'It was still not certain in 1918 but there was no question by 1945. Sea power, industrial power, financial power passed decisively and irrevocably to the U.S.'³⁹ In addition, Britain had accrued a war-debt of £3000 million and, in an unprecedented way, became bound to America through loans and agreements. It is apparent that attitudes in Britain over these loans often took the form of suspicion and bitterness. *The Daily Telegraph* commented on the widespread implications of the loan:

To America what seems to be offered is the largest loan in history at a low rate of interest; why then look a gift-horse in the mouth? The answer is that the horse is not a gift ... Acceptance is conditional not alone by the necessity of finding heavy interest payments and ultimate repayment, but by the immediate acceptance of the Bretton Woods scheme, the freeing at an early date of the blocked sterling balances, and finally the endorsement of trade agreements that, in their implications, profoundly affect commercial policies within the British Empire.⁴⁰

A front page article in *The Daily Telegraph* several days later added wryly: 'This great load of debt which we bring out of the war is indeed a strange reward for all that this land did and suffered in the common cause...'⁴¹ This article reported that the previous day in the House of Commons it had been agreed by 314 votes to 50 to accept the loan. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, had said to the House that once the loan agreement was underway, 'We should also receive large stocks of American goods of all kinds in this country'. This remark suggests both the inevitability of Britain accepting America's terms, and also Britain's heavy dependency on America for the goods that a British manufacturing industry, depleted by war, could not provide. The consequence of American aid was two-fold: it strengthened the American economy further;

and it provided America with the opportunity to lead the way in popular culture, through the export of new commodities.

Clearly many in this country saw Britain's claim to 'leadership' in the cultural, political and economic spheres slipping away. However, a fresh claim was made by Winston Churchill in March 1946, in a speech made at Fulton, Missouri. Here he spoke of how Russia's expansionist tendencies posed a threat to the Western world, and proposed a 'fraternal association' between the United States and Britain to combat this.⁴² The American Senate received this coolly, some senators fearing that such a relationship would find America underwriting British imperialist and trading interests.⁴³

Andrew Gamble believes that although a 'special relationship' did exist, it was 'more special for the British than the Americans, because it was the means by which the British world role was preserved - by being transferred to the Americans.'⁴⁴ In practice it meant that Britain maintained a high commitment to military expenditure; it also kept sterling alive as an international currency. Gamble adds that 'The Americans came to appreciate the advantages of sharing the burdens of leadership in the world economy, so long as Britain remained subordinate to overall American interests and strategy'.⁴⁵

Britain, therefore, entered the post-war world with a future described at the time in terms of both optimism and pessimism. As the discussion of the Picasso exhibition has shown 'the modern' aroused strong reaction from those who saw it as a symptom of social, moral and spiritual turpitude. This exhibition provided these critics with an opportunity to declare Picasso's work, in the pejorative sense, both 'modern' and 'foreign'. In contrast, it was claimed by these same critics that 'Britishness' embodied both a regard for 'tradition' rather than 'change', and an innate respect for 'civilized values'. It has been seen that even for writers such as Robin Ironside, who could not be described as an extreme cultural conservative, the search for 'national identity' in art led him to express a pessimism towards 'the modern' and 'the foreign', and to search instead for what was essentially 'Britishness'. Some optimism was observed in terms of social, economic and political life, but this, too, was not unqualified: in all these spheres 'America' appeared as a spectre threatening to rob Britain of its 'leadership'.

It is within this set of conditions that the Festival of Britain, held in 1951, can be placed. The claims made for the event were certainly ambitious ones: Sir Gerald Barry, Director General of the Festival of Britain, quoting from Herbert Morrison's address to the House of Commons, said that the Festival had been staged to demonstrate, 'The British contribution to civilization, past, present and future, in the arts, in science and technology and in industrial design'.⁴⁶

This claim goes to the heart of the issues considered in the present chapter. It assumes, for example, that Britain had, and continued to have in this post-war period, an important 'leadership' role for the defence and development of 'civilized values'. By implication, several other issues are bound up with this claim. One concerns the perceived need at the time, for Britain to address the tension between 'tradition' on one hand, and 'the modern' on the other. This involved a reassessment and re-assertion of what were believed to be innately 'British' qualities. A second issue concerns the role that art was believed to play in the Festival, and by extension in society as a whole, in both encouraging and sustaining the sometimes conflicting values of being 'British', 'civilised' and 'modern'. The following study of the Festival will seek to enquire into these issues.

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- 2 Ibid., p3.
- 3 Ibid., p1.
- 4 Ibid., p4.
- 5 Robin Ironside, *Painting since 1939*, (British Council, 1947), p14.

- 6 This is discussed throughout the thirties section. See, particularly, Chapter 5.
- 7 Cyril Connolly, *Horizon*, volume 12, number 63, (September, 1945), p149.
- 8 George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn, Socialism and the English Genius*, (London, 1941), p43.
- 9 Ibid., p40.
- 10 Held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 6 December 1945 - 13 January 1946. It contained 25 paintings by Picasso from the war years, and work by Matisse painted between 1896 and 1944. *The Times* (9/1/46) reported the average daily attendance at 5000-6000.
- 11 *The Times*, 4 December, 1945, p5.
- 12 *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 December, 1945, p4. This painting, dated August 1939, was the largest in the show and measured 354x207cm.
- 13 There are three unnumbered pages written by Christian Zervos. *Guernica* is printed at the beginning of the photographs.
- 14 *The Daily Telegraph*, op cit., p4.
- 15 *The Times*, 6 December, 1945, p7.
- 16 Correspondence in *The Times* started in December and continued for the duration of the exhibition.
- 17 See, for example, *The Times*, 15 December, 1945, p5; and 18 December, 1945, p5.

- 18 See, for example, *The Times*, 18 December 1945, p5; and 19
December, 1945, p5.
- 19 *The Times*, 21 December, 1945, p5.
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- 21 *The Times*, 17 December, 1945, p5.
- 22 Letter to *The Times*, 20 December, 1945, p5.
- 23 *Daily Mail*, 6 December, 1945, p3.
- 24 Picasso on joining the Communist Party, from an interview with
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Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood,
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- 25 *The Times*, 21 December, 1945, p5.
- 26 Coldstream is discussed in Chapter 4, pp62-64, in the context of
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December, 1945, p4.
- 27 Robin Ironside, *Painting since 1939*, op cit., p36.
- 28 Ibid., p11.
- 29 Ibid., p9.
- 30 Ibid., p10.
- 31 Discussed in Chapter 5, p80ff.
- 32 Ironside, op cit, p19.

- 33 Ibid., p23.
- 34 Ibid., pp26-27.
- 35 A.J.P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1918*, (Penguin edition, 1970), p727.
- 36 Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline*, second edition, (London, 1985), p103.
- 37 Ibid., p103.
- 38 For a discussion of the nineteenth century roots of English attitudes to America see Martin. J. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*, (Penguin, 1985), pp88-90. See also Appendix 1, *The Studio*, for a discussion of America as a source of innovation.
- 39 Gamble, op cit., p64.
- 40 Editorial from *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 December, 1945, p4.
- 41 *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 December, 1945.
- 42 See *The Times*, 7 March, 1946, p4.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Andrew Gamble, op cit., p105.
- 45 Ibid, pp105-6.
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CHAPTER 7

'The British family': planning for the Festival of Britain.

In order to locate the place and function accorded to art in the Festival of Britain it is first necessary to consider the more general origins of, and principles behind, the event. The date when the idea of a Festival was first discussed is usually put at 1943, when the Royal Society of Arts suggested to the government that something should be staged to commemorate the Great Exhibition of 1851 held at the Crystal Palace, Hyde Park.¹ In fact the origins of the Festival go back at least a further five years and indicate the complex of conflicting ideas behind the event.

In 1938 the *Evening Standard* had printed an article headlined 'Plan for Hyde Park World Fair', suggesting that the year could be 1946 or 1947.² Significantly, at this stage, it was a 'world' trade fair that was envisaged. Later, in 1945, Gerald Barry, at that time editor of the *News Chronicle*, and later to be Director General of the Festival, wrote an open letter to the President of the Board of Trade, Sir Stafford Cripps. He talked of a 'great Trade and Cultural Exhibition to be held in London', and reminded Cripps that he had 'recently called upon the British people to re-establish their economic position in the world by their own exertions, and ... drawn attention to the imperative need to stimulate British exports'.³ Barry also suggested that some balance might be struck between the demonstration of British achievements in culture as well as trade: 'Above all, it would afford an opportunity for assembling in London an international collection of exhibits in the field of the Arts and of Science...'⁴ In the *News Chronicle* the following day a headline read: 'International Exhibition for London - Industry, Science, and the arts support proposal'.⁵ In fact it was those involved in commerce who most heartily endorsed the proposal.

On the 25 September 1945, Hilary Marquand, Secretary to the Department of Overseas Trade, formed the 'Ramsden Committee' to advise him on 'policy and plans in connection with exhibitions, fairs and all public displays designed to promote export'.⁶ When reporting back in March 1946 the committee stated that:

We are strongly of opinion that a first category international

exhibition should be held in London at the earliest practicable date, to demonstrate to the world the recovery of the UK from the effects of the war in the moral, cultural, spiritual and material fields.⁷

This was a proposal for a project with far loftier aims than anything that had been previously suggested; one which attempted to embrace all aspects of life, both temporal and spiritual. Britain's role in all these spheres of 'civilized' life was to show world 'leadership'.⁸

By October 1946, the *News Chronicle* was growing disillusioned by the lack of any progress in preparation for a 'fair'. In an article entitled 'Is 1951 forgotten?' the paper stated that '...the World Exhibition to be held in London in 1951 seems to have passed for the time being out of the public mind. One must assume that it has not passed out of the Government's mind'.⁹ It is perhaps more accurate to represent this period of apparent inactivity by the government as an indication that some resolution was being sought between the conflicting views regarding the precise function of the 'fair', its venue, and the costs involved.

The *News Chronicle* went further in expressing its disappointment by referring to the Ramsden Committee's 'wholehearted recommendation ...that the exhibition "should surpass the New York World's Fair of 1939 in scale and technical achievement and the Paris Exhibition of 1937 in the aesthetic excellence and personal appeal"'.¹⁰ The reality was that the government was not prepared to finance such an ambitious project. The architect Misha Black, who emerged as one of the key organizers of the Festival, had noted in a handwritten draft of c1945 that: '...we would not compete in size with the New York (illegible word) but we would show the British genius for quality for producing an exhibition...'.¹¹ Elsewhere, he gives the same reason for discounting the use of Hyde Park: that it 'might elicit comparisons with New York World Fair but couldn't compete size-wise'.¹² But it is also significant that Black was aware that America posed for Britain some sort of 'leadership' challenge, of the sort discussed in the previous chapter.¹³ He wrote c1948-9 '...if we want to stage the exhibition [sic] we must stake our claim now [Black's emphasis]. Already there are vague rumours of America staking a claim...'.¹⁴

The discussion above suggests that a tension was caused by two demands: the first was the need to stage an event that was not too expensive; and the second was, at the same time, to assert a sense of British 'leadership', with America perceived as the main rival. Clearly, in a period of post-war austerity, the government could not open themselves too easily to accusations of profligacy. As Gerald Barry commented, by late 1946 'It was natural enough that at this point the ministerial mind [should start] looking around for what the Christmas stores' catalogues describe as something "suitable and inexpensive..."¹⁵ Yet all those interested in staging a national event remained anxious that it should convey the 'right' impression at home and abroad. For this reason Black deemed Wembley a 'dreary suburb' and thus totally unsuitable, while he showed great enthusiasm for the site on the South Bank of the Thames. As early as 1936, prior to the bomb-damage created by the war, the South Bank had been identified by John Maynard Keynes as an ideal site for development. To him, any government committed to full employment would undertake projects such as this to stimulate the economy:

Initial preparation should be made, so that some plans will be ready and available to ward off the next slump, for the embellishment and comprehensive rebuilding at the public cost of the unplanned, insalutary and disfiguring quarters of our principal cities. Taking London as our example, we should demolish the majority of the existing buildings on the south bank of the river from the County Hall to Greenwich...¹⁶

For the Labour government of 1945 sympathetic to Keynesian policies, the choice of the South Bank must have seemed an ideal one. Apart from the good practical reasons for this site, Misha Black saw the location at the 'heart' of London as symbolically important:

It must be right in the centre of the metropolis so that the city itself becomes the setting in which the exhibition jewel can shimmer, so that the ancient ['grandure of' inserted by Black] London is accentuated by exhibition and the positive glory of the exhibition is still further accentuated against the sombre majesty of its setting... ¹⁷

Black's claim that 'the ancient' might complement the new also contains, in the jewel/setting analogy, the assertion that 'the modern' was to be seen in the context of, and as the most recent development of certain values and achievements rooted in British 'tradition'.

By 1947 it had become clear that any idea of an exhibition to serve as a focus for international trade and culture had been dropped in favour of something which would assert Britain's role of cultural leadership.¹⁸ At this point the event came under the charge of Herbert Morrison, Lord President of Council, who, in consultation with the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, named it the 'Festival of Britain'. Subsequently, some organizing structure was put into place. Morrison set up the Festival of Britain Council, consisting of 30 members, including politicians and public figures. It has been suggested that the appointment of Lord Ismay, Winston Churchill's wartime Chief of Staff, as Chairman, was a tactical move to avert any public criticism of the Festival by Churchill himself.¹⁹ Other members of the Council included Kenneth Clark, John Gielgud, Sir Malcolm Sargeant, Sir Alan Herbert and Conservative politicians, R. A. Butler and Col. Walter Elliot.

Although it was the Council that finally decided on the South Bank site, and, at first, made some initial decisions and appointments, its role was ultimately an honorary and advisory one. One other group within the Festival organization which had some government involvement was the Festival of Britain Office. This body appointed civil servants at the senior level, along with architects. The Office's main task was to supervise the financial and administrative arrangements.

The position that appeared to rank as the most important and influential in the Festival of Britain organization was that of Director General. To this task Morrison appointed Gerald Barry, whose passionate interest in a national 'event' has already been discussed. He had been managing editor of the *News Chronicle* until 1947 thereafter remaining a director, and also held a directorship of the *New Statesman and Nation*, whose founders were the Fabians, Beatrice and Sydney Webb. His involvement with these two publications, and his enthusiasm for a project which put the arts and sciences at the centre of any

development in society placed him in sympathy with the Socialist reformers of the time, and with a constituency that had the ideals and values of Bloomsbury at its roots.

Barry set up an Executive Committee in 1948. Membership included James Holland, Misha Black and Ian Cox, all of whom had previously worked for the Ministry of Information. They met at Barry's Sussex home to work out a plan - in surroundings that Barry saw as providing the necessary stimulus:

Below us rolled away in succeeding folds of green and gold a landscape of English parkland inherited from an age of men who had such faith in the future of their country, and so robust a sense of responsibility to their successors, that they planted not for themselves but for their great-grandchildren. Here was our incentive.²⁰

'The Land' as a source and symbol of 'Britishness' is seen here by Barry to provide the inspiration, and evoke the same sense of stability and continuity, that it had for artists and writers in the thirties.²¹ The precise nature of this 'Britishness' is expressed by Barry, who identified the ideals and values which, for him, were to be encapsulated in the Festival of Britain:

Behind the varied experiments and achievements of British life there exists a store of common ideas which inspire us to the kind of action we take ... Among them are such things as love of country, love of freedom, love of nature, pride in craftsmanship, tolerance and fair-play. These, though abstractions, are recognizable British traits ... they express themselves dynamically in the kind of Britain we have built or want to build. One or other of these British attributes recurs repeatedly in the themes of all the arts and sciences ... They are part of the driving force of our people.²²

Barry's ambition was that the Festival should be both a celebration of 'Britishness', and also a means of educating the young and raising awareness of the nation's virtues and future prospects.²³

It was the Executive Committee's decision to set up a Presentation Panel, consisting of 10 members in addition to Barry as Chairman. This consisted of Cecil Cooke, Director, Exhibitions, Deputy Chairman and also in charge of the Festival Office; Misha Black, architect; G.A. Campbell, Director, Finance and Establishments; Hugh Casson, Director, Architecture; Ian Cox, Director, Science and Technology and deviser of the exhibition's theme; A.D. Hippisley Coxe and M. Hartland Thomas, from the Council of Industrial Design; James Gardner, exhibition designer; James Holland, designer; Ralph Tubbs, architect; and Peter Kneebone, Secretary. They would be responsible for the 'visual and many non-visual aspects of all the official exhibitions, from choosing the architects and designers to naming the restaurants'.²⁴

When the Presentation Panel was set up a sub-committee was also formed by the Executive Committee. It was called the 'Design Group' and comprised of five members from the Presentation Panel - Misha Black, Hugh Casson, James Gardner, James Holland and Ralph Tubbs. It is relevant to note that both Black and Holland had been active members of the AIA in the thirties, at a time when cooperation between the fine and applied arts was seen as an essential step towards revolutionary social change.²⁵ The only real evidence of such idealism continuing to inform the activities of the Design Group was shown in their intention to commission 'young and untried talent' as designers and architects.²⁶

The Design Group was one of the most important organizing groups of the Festival. This will become more apparent in the following chapter when their activities concerning the use of art at the Festival will be discussed. At this point, though, it is appropriate to note that their first task was 'the nightmare', as Hugh Casson put it, of forging a 'master-plan' for the Festival.²⁷ It was presented to, and approved by, the Festival Council in December 1948. Casson recalled that, 'The brief [as expressed by Cripps] demanded a narrative exhibition, a story...'²⁸ Subsequently, the 'master-plan' devised by the Design Group proposed, among other things, a centre-piece - which became the Dome of Discovery, an Upstream section given to the 'Land of Britain', and a downstream section to the 'People of Britain'.²⁹

Barry's description of the essential 'British' character described above, and the

Design Group's proposals for the Festival found further elaboration in the Visitor's Guide to the South Bank Exhibition. The guide was headed 'The Story the Exhibition Tells', and inside it developed the two themes suggested by the Design Group - 'the Land' and 'the People'.³⁰ Fifteen pavilions were arranged to exemplify these themes. In addition, the Dome of Discovery was added to demonstrate technological and scientific achievements - other features included the Skylon Tower and the Royal Festival Hall. There were also specially designed restaurants and, further out in Battersea, the Festival Pleasure Gardens.³¹

As preparations for the Festival got underway The Festival Office played its part in stimulating interest and activity in towns and villages throughout Britain through the issue of the newspaper *The Festival Post*, first published in June 1950. It contained a mixture of items intended to inform, encourage and chide. A complaint was made in issue two that:

...local authorities everywhere must enter wholeheartedly into the spirit of the great idea. Are they doing it? A few are showing enterprise. Most of them are timid, and some are definitely hostile ... their attitude is not good enough.³²

Although evidence of some recalcitrance and hostility was identified in the *Festival Post*, the general tone of the publication was an optimistic one which celebrated the corporate effort of the 'British' people. The high-minded ideals of Barry and the Design Group were translated into homespun 'truths' for the populace:

Britain is sending out her invitation cards to the world to come to the Festival of Britain ... We shall offer them a British cup of tea and show them the family album. We shall stroll with them round our gardens, and let them peep into Daddy's workshop. They will be shown what the British family have done, what it is doing, and what we are planning to do in the future.³³

This expression of the Festival's aspirations has a particularly paternalistic inflection, aimed to convince, in this instance it would seem, the British public

themselves. The reference to 'Daddy's workshop' also implies that Britain remained a primary source of innovation and commercial production in the post-war world. At one level Barry, the Presentation Panel and the Design Group embodied their lofty ideals in the overall plans for the Festival. At another level the guides and Festival newspapers often took these ideals and translated them into homilies. Yet a thread running through all of this was that the 'British', while demonstrating diversity, were united as a 'family' through common traits and characteristics, and a common sense of purpose.

In the aftermath of a destructive war it is not difficult to understand why the image of 'the family' was evoked as a symbol of unity. Henry Moore's sculptures at this time, on the theme of 'mother and child', seemed particularly able to catch this mood. One such example was his stone carving, *Madonna and Child*, commissioned by the church of St. Matthew, Northampton, during 1943-44. The theme, Mother and Child, had preoccupied Moore for many years, but for this religious sculpture he believed that a certain 'hieratic aloofness' was required.³⁴ As it was produced at the end of war it is also possible to understand this sculpture as a symbol of national reconciliation and unity. During the early fifties Moore continued to re-work the Mother and Child theme. In 1950 he produced a number of small bronze sculptures of a mother sitting in a rocking chair playing with a child. In comparison with the Northampton *Madonna and Child* these were intimate and light-hearted. The theme continued to provide for Moore a rich source of imagery, sometimes taking abstract form, such as *Internal External Forms*, made in Elmwood, 1952-53, and even incorporating a male figure, as in *Family Group*, made from Hadene Stone, 1955. Herbert Read saw Moore's representations of the Mother and Child as the evocation of ancient archetypes: 'The mother is idealized, becomes the Great Mother, the goddess of human fertility or fecundity; the Child is the symbol of genetic promise and continuity, of life renewed in each generation'.³⁵ In the post-war period, when the scale of human tragedy and devastation was still being deeply felt, it is not difficult to understand why Moore's sculptures became metaphors of hope and renewal.

Evocations of 'The Family' in this post-war period were not restricted to Britain. Another near-contemporary cultural enterprise employing the metaphor of 'the family' was the exhibition *The Family of Man* which opened at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, in January 1955. It consisted of 503

photographs by 273 photographers from 68 countries, and while at MOMA drew some 3000 visitors a day. After New York it toured over 41 countries in three separate versions and attracted a total audience of around nine-million. A book of the same title was produced which, by the mid-eighties, had sold around four million copies.³⁶ The exhibition was organized by the photographer Edward Steichen and took the form of a documentary, showing people of different races, ages, classes and physical types.

It is clear that in both the American and British exhibitions the term 'The Family' had a particular resonance. In the Festival of Britain this phrase took on a more parochial inflection, but in *The Family of Man* it functioned on a global scale. The former affirmed Britain's small, but effective 'family', and its proven achievements in the evolution of 'civilized' life, promising to lead the world in the future. In contrast, the latter demonstrated confidence in identifying a broader, global 'family'. Such confidence, it could be suggested, was borne from the knowledge that in this post-war period America dominated the world economically and politically. Further to this, it may be suggested that the need for a consolidation of support at home, and a demonstration of leadership in the world was at stake in both exhibitions. At the Festival of Britain it was the face of 'old' paternalism that was on show; at *The Family of Man*, it was the face of the 'new'.

One further point of comparison between these two exhibitions can be made. This concerns the more precise way that discourses of 'the family' were articulated. As Steichen saw it, the leitmotifs of *The Family of Man* were 'creation, birth, love, work, death, justice, the search for knowledge, relationships, democracy, peace, and opposition to brutality and slaughter'.³⁷ While not identical to Barry's stated ambitions for the Festival of Britain, this list is similar - it describes the *diversity* of human achievements, yet insists on the underlying *unity* of humanity. In this sense both Barry and Steichen embrace the ideals of liberal humanism. It was the humanist ideals of *The Family of Man* that subsequently drew criticism. One such critic was the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes who wrote after it had been shown in Paris. He said that in the exhibition, '...diversity is only formal and does not belie the existence of a common mould'.³⁸ Barthes drew attention to the poems and texts which accompanied the show. There was a discourse which, he said:

...aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices' .³⁹

When the Festival of Britain opened on 3 May most of the Right-wing press, apart from the *Daily Express*, had come round to lending support. Differences were put aside, it was said, and British 'unity' affirmed'. On 3 May, the *Daily Mail* led on its front page:

The Festival has arrived. It has nothing, now, to do with politics. but everything to do with the British people. We must make it succeed, and those who dislike it should show how British they are by being good losers.

Here the *Daily Mail* extracts a notion of 'the British people' and elevates it as a concept above historical contingency. It is in this sense, as Barthes suggests, a denial of the 'determining weight of history'.

During the preparations for the Festival there had been criticism from the Right-wing press which interpreted any problems the organizers encountered as evidence of the failings of Socialism in general. The *Daily Express*, for example, carried a front page story headed '2 Festival Chiefs Quit', which went on to imply the squandering of public money or even embezzlement.⁴⁰ On another occasion the *Daily Telegraph* reported on the front page that the turnstile men at the Festival had threatened to strike for higher pay, as if this demonstrated a collapse of respect for authority under socialism.⁴¹

The criticisms from the Right, then, were not an attempt to dispel the myth of 'Britishness' but to re-articulate the elements of the discourse. Writing in 1944, the Right-wing economist Friedrich Hayek, offered an alternative account of 'Britishness':

British strength, British character, and British achievements are

to a great extent the result of a cultivation of the spontaneous. But almost all the traditions and institutions in which British moral genius has found its most characteristic expression, and which in turn have moulded the national character and the whole moral climate of England, are those which the progress of collectivism and its inherently centralistic tendencies are progressively destroying.⁴²

Hayek's celebration here of the 'British' 'tradition' of encouraging 'freedom', 'spontaneity', and 'individuality' would have found little argument with Barry. As discussed earlier these were the same liberal values and ideals invoked by the chief organizers at the Festival. The difference was that Hayek saw 'collectivism' as irreconcilable with 'freedom' and 'individuality' and thus with 'Britishness'. There is evidence, in the context of the Festival, that others shared Hayek's views. This was particularly apparent in the controversy over the role of the Arts Council. The Arts Council had been formed in 1946 and played an important part in the Festival's organization.⁴³ As a consequence of its support for 'modern art', however, a protest was made against the Council. One correspondent to *The Times* accused the Council of demonstrating a tendency towards 'collectivism' and 'centralism', both of which were 'un-British' and anathema to 'freedom':

It is with the very idea of preserving the freedom of the arts that the protest has been made. It is not suggested that the present panel is in any way influenced by political considerations, but that such have entered into the activities of self-appointed bodies in other countries reveals the latent danger to artistic freedom.⁴⁴

Once the Festival had opened, although some consensus existed around the notion of 'the British family', these deeper ideological conflicts and differences remained. They manifested themselves most vividly in the attitude taken to the use of art at the Festival. This will provide the subject for the following two chapters.

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- 1 This account of events is given by Sir Gerald Barry, the Director General of the Festival in his 'First Cantor Lecture' given to the

R.S.A. on 12 May, 1952, printed in *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 22 August, 1952, pp667-678. It is repeated in a more recent account of the event, *A Tonic to the Nation - The Festival of Britain, 1951*, edited by Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, (London, 1976), p12.

- 2 *Evening Standard*, 28 November, 1938, p1. Found in the Victoria and Albert Museum archive, AAD3-1980, Box 1, Boxfile 2. As this was from one of Misha Black's own collection of cuttings it is reasonable to assume that, as one of the eventual organizers of the Festival, he had maintained from an early stage an interest in the development of ideas concerning the event.
- 3 *News Chronicle*, 14 September, 1945, p2.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *News Chronicle*, 15 September, 1945, p2.
- 6 As reported in *Advertisers Weekly*, 1 November, 1945, unpaginated, from Misha Black's collection of clippings, Victoria and Albert Museum archive, AAD3-1980, Box 1, Boxfile 3.
- 7 As quoted by Gerald Barry in his 'First Cantor Lecture', op cit., p668.
- 8 When *The Times* commented on the report, 4 April, 1946, p5, it interpreted the committee's recommendations in just this way.
- 9 *News Chronicle*, 15 October, 1946, unpaginated. The article was a 'Spotlight' feature by A.J.Cummings and was found in Misha Black's collection of Press cuttings, Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, AAD3-1980, Box 1, Boxfile 3.
- 10 Ibid.

- 11 Misha Black was a member of the Festival Presentation Panel and the Design Group - two of the most important decision-making groups involved. He was also a coordinating architect for the upstream section of the South Bank exhibition, coordinating designer for the Dome of Discovery, and co-architect for the Regatta Restaurant and the Bailey Bridge. The draft referred to was found in the Misha Black archive, op cit., Box 2, Boxfile 4, item 4, p4. It was on undated quarto sheets in Black's handwriting. A possible date for this script is 1945-6.
- 12 From a typed report (recipient unknown) on the 'International Exhibition, London, 1951', 28 September 1945, *ibid.*, item 6.
- 13 Chapter 6, p101ff.
- 14 From an undated, quarto sheet in Misha Black's handwriting, probably written c1948-9, Misha Black archives, op cit., AAD3-1980, Box 2, Boxfile 4, item 4.
- 15 Sir Gerald Barry, 'Lecture One' from 'Three Cantor Lectures', op cit., p669.
- 16 John Maynard Keynes, 'Art and the State', first published in *The Listener*, 26 August, 1936. From *The Collected writings of John Maynard Keynes*, volume 28, (Cambridge, 1982), pp341-349, p348. I discuss Keynes' relationship with the Bloomsbury group in Chapter 3 of this thesis.
- 17 Source as for reference 14.
- 18 Barry writes that: '...all idea of an international exhibition was now definitely dropped, and this fact was announced in the House of Commons in March, 1947, by Sir Stafford Cripps', from 'Three Cantor Lectures', op cit., p670.
- 19 This suggestion is made by Adrian Forty in 'Festival Politics', A

- Tonic to the Nation*, op cit., pp26-39, p29.
- 20 'Three Cantor Lectures', op cit., p675.
- 21 This invocation of 'the landscape' forms the focus of Chapter 4.
- 22 'Three Cantor Lectures', op cit., p676.
- 23 In the 'Festival of Britain - Souvenir in Pictures', published by the *News Chronicle*, price 2/6d, Barry wrote in the introduction: 'One is especially attracted by its [the Festival's] appeal to the younger generation - for that is one of the chief aims of the Festival of Britain itself'.
- 24 This is recalled by Anthony D. Hippenley Cox in his contribution to the book *A Tonic to the Nation*, op cit., pp88-90, p88. He was also features editor of the *News Chronicle*.
- 25 The AIA is discussed in Chapter 4, p62ff.
- 26 This intention was described by Hugh Casson in his contribution to *A Tonic to the Nation*, pp76-81, p78.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p78.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p78.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p78. Here Casson describes the plan in greater detail.
- 30 The Official Guide to the Festival of Britain, pp8-9.
- 31 These details are well documented in *A Tonic to the Nation*, op cit.
- 32 *Festival Post*, issue mid-July, 1950, published at Hansard House, London, editorial, p3.

- 33 *Festival Post*, issue 1, June 1950, front page.
- 34 See Herbert Read, *Henry Moore - Mother and Child*, (UNESCO, 1966), p19. This is from a letter by Moore, quoted by Herbert Read. Read does not make it clear who the letter was written to, but it was probably Read himself.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p23.
- 36 This information is from the exhibition catalogue, *American Images - Photography 1945 - 1980*, (Penguin, 1985), p13. The exhibition was held at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1985.
- 37 These were listed by Dorothy Norman under Steichen's direction, *ibid.*, p13.
- 38 Roland Barthes, 'The Great Family of Man', *Mythologies*. first published in 1957, taken here from the 'Vintage Edition', (London, 1993), pp100-102, p100.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p101.
- 40 4 April, 1951.
- 41 21 April, 1951.
- 42 Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, (London, 1944), p159.
- 43 From a letter written by Gilbert B. Solomon to *The Times*, 15 September, 1951, p5.
- 44 The role of the Arts Council in the Festival of Britain is discussed in Chapter 9.

CHAPTER 8

How to be modern and British? Choosing and siting art at the Festival of Britain.

As suggested in the previous chapter, any discussion of the decisions taken regarding art at the Festival of Britain has to focus principally on the activities of the Design Group. Hugh Casson, the Group's first chairman, described the Group's function in terms of artless dilettantism and friendly cooperation:

...the decision of the Design Group was always unanimous even if wrong! ... I suppose in defence of hasty or ill-considered aesthetic decisions we have to remember that the agenda of a design group meeting would include the design of lavatory attendant's overalls, the graphics for tickets, a litter bin, etc., and we were in a *desperate hurry* [Casson's emphasis]. Obviously we made misjudgements ... but we did our best.¹

Memoranda from the Director General, Gerald Barry, and minutes from the Design Group usefully illuminate the relationship between these two levels of Festival organization. Barry, it seems, established general principles, made suggestions, and retained the power of veto. In a memorandum of March 1950, for example, he stated that painters would be chosen who are suitable for '...an exhibition whose purpose is to display British contributions to civilization...' ² In this respect he set down two main rules: no artist should receive more than one commission for a mural painting; and no mural painter should receive a commission unless it was personally approved by the Director General.³ Casson commented that it had also been the responsibility of the Design Group to interview all the painters who wished to participate.

It is also made apparent from memorandum and minutes that an open and amicable relationship existed between Barry and the Design Group, with the former appearing happy to defer to the expertise of the latter. In an early memorandum from Barry, for example, he listed artists who he believed would 'elect themselves automatically as being painters of international renown', and over whom 'there will probably be general agreement'.⁴ These were: Duncan Grant, Augustus John, Matthew Smith, Graham Sutherland and Stanley Spencer.

Beside these 'naturals' as Barry called them, he listed nineteen other artists who he felt should be offered work.⁵ Of these twenty four artists, Mary Potter was the only woman.

When the Design Group received and discussed this list, they made some significant alterations. In addition to Barry's 'naturals' they added Leonard Rosoman, John Piper, John Minton and Francis Bacon, none of whom had even been amongst Barry's 'nineteen'.⁶ With the exception of Sutherland, Barry's 'naturals' were selected from Bloomsbury artists and those trained at the Slade. The Design Group's list was more contemporary and updated modern British art to include those artists more recently recognized as representative of 'neo-Romanticism'. The Design Group's selection bears out Robin Ironside's advocacy of a younger generation of modern British artists who, he claimed, had learned from, yet eventually rejected, the 'excesses of abstraction, and returned to the authentic 'humanist' and 'liberal' ideals of the 'British tradition'.⁷ The Design Group also added further names to the 'nineteen': of particular note were Lucian Freud, Robert Colquhoun and Carel Weight.⁸

As previously mentioned two members of the Design Group, Misha Black and James Holland, had also belonged to the AIA from its inception in 1933.⁹ Indeed Black had been Chairman from 1933 until 1944. It is perhaps worthwhile here to relate this to the Design Group's selection of artists. Quite clearly some of those artists already on Barry's list of 'nineteen', such as William Coldstream and Robert Medley, exemplified the 'social realist' art that the AIA had promoted in the thirties. In addition, the Design Group recommended Carel Weight, another artist associated with this form of 'realism'. Predominantly though, the Design Group's choice of 'naturals' was drawn from the 'neo-Romantics'.

An indication that there could be some compatibility between the interests of the 'social realists' and the 'neo-Romantics' has already been noted in this study when, during the thirties, Myfanwy Evans included Julian Trevelyan in her book *The Painter's Object*.¹⁰ It may be that in the post-war period the Design Group genuinely felt that artists from these two 'groups' expressed the social conditions and existential preoccupations of the post-war world, and remained 'realist' in this sense. It is also possible that those radicals committed to the pre-war AIA had lost faith in Stalinism, or their ideals had been tempered once a socialist

government had been installed in 1945. Perhaps the selection of artists made by the Design Group was severely constrained by the demands of the Festival.

While this remains speculative there are several other points of interest concerning the selection of artists made by the Design Group. The first was their deletion of Duncan Grant from Barry's list of 'naturals'. It was recorded in the minutes of their meeting that: 'The group agreed that it was not in sympathy with the work of Mr D. Grant and Mr Casson undertook to ask the D.G. [Director General] if he would agree that Mr Grant should not receive a commission'.¹¹ To this Barry appears to have readily acceded. In retrospect Casson has said that 'Grant, I think, was regarded as too "decorative" and "ballet-backcloth" in his murals and unlikely to register to its [the Festival's] credit except perhaps in a restaurant'.¹² Their concern may have been that Grant seemed 'stuck' within the aesthetics of Fry and Bloomsbury. Unlike other artists of his generation, such as Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore, he had failed to register an interest in the 'modern' developments of Surrealism and Abstraction. It was Grant's perceived 'outdated' style that appears to have concerned the Design Group.

The Design Group, it seems, chose artists whose work would signify 'the modern' while still remaining securely located in the 'British tradition' mapped out by Ironside. It had been apparent from before the war among the artists and writers associated with both the 'neo-Romantics' and the 'social realists' that some antagonism was felt towards certain Bloomsbury ideals. Each 'group', it seems, undertook a return to 'figuration' in opposition to the perceived 'extreme purity' of Bloomsbury aesthetics that had led, regrettably in their opinion, to abstraction. In doing so they strove to reassert a form of representation which they believed to be more securely 'British'.

Taken together the 'neo-Romantics' and 'social realists' seemed to provide for the Design Group recent art which best signified 'the modern' and 'the British'. These were the two qualities which they no doubt hoped would, to use Casson's terms, 'register to the Festival's credit'. It should be remembered however, that despite the pre-war objections to abstract art, and those maintained by Ironside in the post-war period, this did not prevent such art from appearing at the Festival. Ben Nicholson and Victor Pasmore, for example, both produced murals for restaurants, and it was clearly incumbent on the Design Group to find a place

for 'abstraction'. It is significant, though, that the work of these artists formed more of a decorative feature than an object of contemplation. Since the thirties the issue of whether abstract art had any value outside 'decoration' had been raised frequently in British art circles, and was a particular issue of dispute in the 'Art and Nature' debate.¹³ In the context of the Festival of Britain, abstract art was most easily accommodated as 'decorative'. This is not to suggest that figurative work lacked a decorative quality. Rather, it reveals how many believed abstract art to lack the 'autonomy' and 'fullness' associated with figurative work.

There is a further point of interest to note about the selection of artists made by the Design Group. This concerns their apparent anxiety about choosing artists that were seen to possess gravity and serious intent as opposed to 'commercial' artists. It was recorded at a Design Group meeting that: 'Mr Casson referred to the memorandum from the Director-General ... in which he expressed his feeling that too many commercial artists were being commissioned'.¹⁴ Subsequently the Group went through the list of artists and marked some 'S' for 'small easel painting' and 'C' for 'commercial' or 'second-rank'.¹⁵

The art and artists finally selected for inclusion at the Festival can be seen to fulfil three functions: 1. to exemplify the theme of a pavilion; 2. to complement architecture, or to perform a design function; and 3. to make a discrete contribution as part of an art exhibition. This provided the opportunity for the Design Group to use art in a variety of contexts to demonstrate what were for them both the permanent and unchanging values of Britain as a 'civilised' society, and Britain as a continuing source of innovation and progress. The tension involved in attempting to address the issues of being both 'British' and 'modern' has already been discussed in the wider context of the Festival. Now, in turn, each of the three functions of art at the Festival listed above will be looked at to see how this tension was negotiated.

Nineteen pavilions were set up at the Festival as a means of focussing on specific aspects of British life or British achievements. Some dealt with leisure and social themes: such as 'Homes and Gardens' and 'The New Schools'. Others took more general concepts: such as 'The People of Britain' and 'The Land of Britain'. Art was featured in all the major pavilions, in the form of murals, easel paintings and other artefacts, such as ceramics and crafts. 'The Lion and the Unicorn' will

be singled out for consideration for the way art functioned in what the Souvenir Booklet described as 'The Pavilion which ... crystallises all that the Festival of Britain really stands for...'¹⁶

The Pavilion's overt theme was national identity and in its planning stages it had been provisionally titled 'Character and Tradition'.¹⁷ The Souvenir Booklet claimed for the Pavilion in general that: 'In short it enounces our way of life - all the institutions, including Parliament and Press, we ourselves have made and which in turn help to make us what we are'.¹⁸ The displays included a feature on the translation of the Bible into English; an 'eccentrics corner' of inventions; a display to represent British law and the Constitution; and a display of crafts. There was also a section on the works of Shakespeare, including five scaled-down sets for his plays designed by Robin and Christopher Ironside, and bookshelves displaying translations into forty other languages. Robin Ironside was referred to earlier as the author of the book, commissioned by the British Council, on the state of post-war British art.¹⁹ It is curious that a writer on the modern developments in British art should fail to be chosen as an artist for the main exhibition of contemporary art at the Festival, but should contribute, instead, in this more parochial way.²⁰

At the planning stages for the Festival the Director-General, Gerald Barry, had stated that, 'works of art ... shall be commissioned or chosen as representative of the best of British painting (or sculpture) in *their own right* [Barry's emphasis] rather than as merely illustrative of a theme'.²¹ This advice seems only partially borne out in the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion. The Pavilion contained, for example, two large murals: one by Edward Bawden on the theme of 'country life', and the other by Kenneth Rowntree depicting twelve scenes from British history AD500-1947.²² These two works seemed to do little more than treat the theme in a lighter, illustrative vein to complement the more didactic approach chosen for the displays. This was not the case, though, for the inclusion of easel paintings by Gainsborough, Turner, Constable and Nash.²³

At one level the work of these four artists is imbued with the significance given to the over-arching theme of the Pavilion: the Lion and the Unicorn. These two creatures made from straw, stood high on the wall at the entrance, with the accompanying legend: 'We are the Lion and the Unicorn, twin symbols of the

Briton's character. As the Lion I give him solidity and strength. With the Unicorn he lets himself go'. One of the designers of the Pavilion explained further:

The Lion was speaking because the Unicorn was otherwise engaged. He was up to his tricks straight away. He had a rope in one front paw which lifted the latch of a colossal rattan birdcage hanging from the roof and released the great flight of doves to soar to freedom up the length of the hall.²⁴

'Freedom' and the liberation of the imagination are seen here to be embedded in the contradictory, but not irreconcilable, symbols which represent the essence and productive force of the 'British character'. This same belief was also fundamental to influential accounts of the 'nature' of English art. Herbert Read, for example, had written in 1933 of the English 'genius' which combined an 'earthy instinct' with the 'spiritual virtues of magic, beauty and grace'.²⁵ Nikolaus Pevsner maintained a similar view for his Reith lectures in 1955 on 'The Englishness of English Art', and in a subsequent, much acclaimed, book of the same title published a year later.²⁶ He wrote: 'The history of styles ... can only be successful - that is approach truth - if it is conducted in terms of polarities, that is in pairs of apparently contradictory qualities'.²⁷ For Pevsner, Constable and Turner represented two manifestations of the English character: in the former 'truth to nature', in the latter 'fantasmagoria'. He concluded that, 'their specifically unsculptural, unplastic, cloudy, or steamy treatment is, as will be shown, English all the same'.²⁸

In general terms the easel paintings in the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion can be seen to serve as exemplars of 'English' imagination and individuality. Yet for Pevsner the artist who best epitomised the reconciliation of 'contraries' was William Blake, whose work was not included in the Pavilion. This suggests that the more specific theme drawn from the paintings was their 'English' attention to 'nature', or observation, through portraiture and the landscape. Such a theme was considered by Read, Pevsner and Ironside as central to 'Englishness'.²⁹ Read had written of, '...that aspect of English genius more typical of our science and philosophy - that gift for tireless detailed observation, the foundation of our reputation as empiricists'.³⁰ An 'instinctive preference for empirical

philosophies' as Ironside puts it, is frequently claimed by writers who identify figurative work as 'innately English'. Such writers then contrast this with 'abstraction', considering it too 'foreign' and too 'theoretical' to take root in Britain.³¹

The siting of Gainsborough, Turner, Constable and Nash together can therefore be seen as signifying those broader 'English' attributes and 'civilized values' which are celebrated throughout the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion. According to the Souvenir booklet, this building offered a 'demonstration ... of the way the typical Briton ticks and why'.³² One inescapable conclusion to be drawn from this is that for many people, and indeed for the Design Group who were largely responsible for the Pavilion, 'English' values and qualities formed the essential core of what it was to be 'British'.

There is one further way that the easel paintings under discussion function in the overall narrative of the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion. The article in the Souvenir booklet on this pavilion was sub-headed: 'The story seems endless; and is endlessly absorbing'. These paintings, ranging from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century suggest a continuum, and can be seen to reinforce the attitudes and values of a conservative position where 'tradition' and 'continuity' are regarded as the bedrock of 'Britishness'. In this context the British 'modern', represented by Nash's landscape painting, is no longer in tension with the issues and concerns of 'the modern' artist but signifies some resolution within the terms of a broader national tradition. His typically 'English' qualities of 'moderation' and 'temperance' are seen to somehow redeem his 'modernity'. It was exactly this representation of Nash's work that Read gave us, writing after the artist's death. His painting, he says, expressed: '...not so many dogmatic statements of irreconcilable "schools" - they were manners, media, in which an artist could express his vision.'³³ The importance of Nash as a 'moderate' who always avoided 'extremism' had been noted by Myfanwy Evans writing in 1937.³⁴ This also remained the dominant representation of him in the eighties.³⁵

The second function for art at the Festival identified earlier was to complement architecture, or perform a design function. In contrast to what has been observed so far in the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion, the art used in this way appeared, at least ostensibly, to engage more actively with one aspect of 'the

modern': the idea of the unification of art, design and architecture. Misha Black claimed that one of the aims of the Festival was 'to show that painters and sculptors could work with architects, landscape architects and exhibition designers to produce an aesthetic unity'.³⁶ Such an aspiration chimes well with the stated intentions of *Unit One* in the thirties, discussed in an earlier chapter.³⁷ Indeed Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, all associated with *Unit One*, also contributed to the Festival.

The newly formed Arts Council, rather than the Design Group, had been given a role to commission some sculpture. This was in keeping with the overall Festival policy to involve organizations that had some national standing. These 'Constituent Bodies' as they were called, also included the Council of Industrial Design, the National Book League, and the British Film Institute. The Arts Council commissioned twelve pieces of sculpture.³⁸ This included Henry Moore's large *Reclining Figure* in bronze (42"x90") sited outside the Country Pavilion, and Barbara Hepworth's tall, *Contrapuntal Forms* (90"x42") made from Blue Limestone set against the Skylon Tower.

The Design Group itself commissioned murals for the outside of buildings. Ben Nicholson produced an abstract painting for the wall of the Riverside Restaurant, and Victor Pasmore used a spiral motif for his ceramic mural outside the Regatta Restaurant. As mentioned earlier, many saw this as the proper role of abstract art - it was not to be accorded the status of a discrete object of contemplation but was to function as a decorative element within a larger architectural scheme. Not all outside murals were abstract though. John Piper's commission for the 'Homes and Gardens' Pavilion did not engage with architectural concerns but adopted a more conventional trompe-l'oeil style using streets and buildings as the subject.

Measured against Black's statement that the sculptures and murals should contribute to some sense of 'aesthetic unity' in the arts, the result was less than successful. The problem of placing sculpture against architecture was noted by one critic who wrote of Hepworth's *Contrapuntal Forms* that it was: '...compelled to compete with the Dome of Discovery, the Skylon and the distant view of the charming gables of Whitehall Court'.³⁹ Both Casson and Black acknowledged some of the difficulties of the overall scheme. Casson wrote:

'Every architect ... was asked to budget for and place some piece of "fine art" - mural, tapestry, graphics, sculpture etc. - in his pavilion', yet, he continued, '...such, I fear, is the ignorance of so many architects about artists they usually had to be assisted in their choice'.⁴⁰

Black's appraisal was somewhat different. He wrote of the 'brave attempt to unify art with architecture', but recognized its ultimate failure at the Festival.⁴¹ He felt that one particular reason for this was that much of the art lacked impact and failed to meet two essential criteria. Art was good, he suggested, when the '...subject is deeply emotive and when it is at the same time of such aesthetic consequence that no one can contemplate it without empathic involvement'.⁴² The idea of the unity of the arts, and Black's belief that good art should provide some aesthetic experience accessible to all, has some coherence with the 'realism' expounded earlier by his AIA colleague from the thirties, Francis Klingender. Klingender, quoting Lenin, had already articulated a version of Black's requirement that good art should be 'emotive' and empathic:

Its roots should penetrate deeply into the very thick of the masses of the people. It should be comprehensible to these masses and loved by them. It should unite the emotions, the thoughts and the will of these masses and raise them to a higher level.⁴³

Perhaps a scheme to unify modern art and architecture at the Festival of Britain was flawed from the outset. From the art critic Clement Greenberg's modernist viewpoint, for example, it would be claimed that one of the necessary preconditions of good art practice in the twentieth century was that it should identify what is unique to each medium, and pursue it independent of any other concern.⁴⁴

Whether, in reality, the effort to unify art and architecture at the Festival of Britain could ever have been 'successful', it may be of greater significance that the effort was made at all. Rather than a genuine unity between the visual arts ever being achieved (or achievable) the *idea* of unity was itself an important theme of the Festival. 'Unity' signified the effort to encourage a sense of purpose and corporate responsibility in British society as a whole, and the visual arts

helped to articulate this particular ideal.

The third function of art at the Festival was to provide material for specific art exhibitions. In order to fulfil this, 'Constituent Bodies' were made responsible for the organization and selection of work, rather than the Design Group. Several smaller exhibitions were shown in London galleries, separate from the South Bank site. Two of these were staged by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), a newly formed organization that had only found permanent premises in Dover Street, London, in 1950. The first, *Ten Decades - a review of British Taste 1851-1951*, was by arrangement with the Arts Council, and was selected by a panel which included Robin Ironside. Geoffrey Grigson explained that the aim was: '...to indicate the waverings and interweavings of taste through a hundred years'.⁴⁵ In contrast to this retrospective look at British art, the exhibition *Growth and Form* focussed on contemporary ideas. It was selected by a committee of twelve which included Herbert Read, and was organized by Richard Hamilton.⁴⁶ This exhibition will receive fuller attention at a later stage for its significance in exemplifying certain 'modern' ideas associated with Hamilton and other artists and writers associated with the 'Independent Group'.

The Festival's centrepiece of art was *60 Paintings for '51*, organized by the Arts Council, and shown in twelve cities including London.⁴⁷ Although sixty artists were commissioned, fifty four paintings and eight sculptures were finally exhibited.⁴⁸ There was a panel of fifteen selectors, including Herbert Read and Henry Moore, although others were largely chosen from art institutions, both public and private.⁴⁹ This included Sir Philip Hendy (Director of the National Gallery), Sir John Rothenstein (Director of the Tate Gallery) and Sir Leigh Ashton (Director of the V&A Museum). The latter, it may be recalled, had denied any responsibility for the Picasso and Matisse exhibition held at the V&A in 1946, claiming that he had no specific expertise on the subject of modern art.⁵⁰ Initially there are two points to be raised about this exhibition. The first concerns the selection of artists, and the second concerns the size of the work commissioned.

Philip James, Art Director of the Arts Council at the time, and also a selector, made a general comment that has some bearing on the first of these. He wrote:

If the Festival of Britain is to achieve its avowed aim of showing the British way of life in all its various facets it is clearly appropriate that a number of our distinguished painters and sculptors should have been given the opportunity to make their contribution.⁵¹

This suggests a democratic spirit and, in keeping with this, artists were given a free choice over subject-matter, and the canvas they required was provided by the Arts Council.⁵² The organizers sought to demonstrate the 'various facets' of British art by inviting artists whose work covered most of the styles of the twentieth century. This included both academicians and 'modern' artists. The latter group ranged from those associated with Bloomsbury, such as Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Matthew Smith, to the more recent 'neo-Romantics'. The overall effect was one in which 'modern' developments were acknowledged, but where 'moderation' prevailed.

Of all the paintings exhibited only two could be defined as 'abstract' in the sense of them not having clearly recognizable objects, people, etc., as their subject-matter. These were William Gear's *Autumn Landscape*, and Victor Pasmore's *The Snowstorm: Spiral Motif in Black and White*. The remaining work was predominantly figurative and landscape, with a few still-life subjects. Overwhelmingly, the exhibition signified the durability of a 'British' tradition tempered, but never fundamentally altered, by 'the modern'. The *Daily Telegraph* represented the exhibition in just this way, in a review aptly titled 'Caprice, Cubism and Reality'. The article implied that modern art was whimsy in contrast to the authenticity of 'tradition': 'Cubism has its fling ... Adventurous flights in surrealism are undertaken ... But the solid and most gratifying part of the exhibition betokens a return of British painting to nature and reality'.⁵³

The second point to raise concerns the significance of the organizers' decision to commission work no smaller than 45" x 60". Philip James expressed the important social dimension of this enterprise, urging municipal and commercial bodies to purchase and commission art for public places:

There are paintings here which should find homes in a new church, a modern liner, the offices of the National Coal Board,

the hotel lounges of British Railways, the waiting-rooms of airports, the foyers of cinemas. May those who have a responsibility in this matter respond.⁵⁴

In addition to the intended social function of these paintings their large size could be seen to register as 'boldness'. Due to scarcity of materials, financial hardship, and the lack of patrons, many participating artists were unused to working on such a scale, and the production of large, public paintings in this immediate post-war period connoted 'plenty' at a time of austerity. It may be that the organizers believed that their stipulation for artists to make large paintings would signify to the public the 'largeness' of Britain's cultural and social vision. Perhaps it was also the case that artists, and others who were interested in modern art, had noticed the tendency towards large paintings in America and sought to match it. Some would have been acquainted with the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman. The painter, William Gear commented:

The main impact of the Americans was the scale. They all seemed to paint nothing less than a ten-foot canvas. In Europe, generally, you simply couldn't do this - you couldn't afford it. Even the canvas was rationed. Paints were difficult ... But in America it didn't mean anything at all. You could go out and buy fifty metres of cotton-duck and sixteen gallons of paint and away you went. But this couldn't happen in Europe. In America they had the backing of critics, and museums, and the big collectors with money ... And they also had the support of *Life* magazine and *Time* magazine.⁵⁵

It is questionable whether or not Gear's assessment of conditions in America is entirely accurate, but it nevertheless suggests how a modern British artist of the time might have perceived these conditions, and how they were seen in relation to those prevailing in Britain. Gear refers to the cultural milieu of America where there was mutual support between artist and patron, and it is perhaps the organizers' requirement for large paintings at *60 Paintings for '51* which represents an effort to generate a similar situation in Britain. A more speculative reason why this work was commissioned is that its large-scale ambition

represented a challenge to America. Such a demonstration of British 'leadership' would be consistent with Misha Black's concern to beat the Americans to holding a Festival.

It is significant that neither the organizers nor the artists at the exhibition appeared to engage with American artistic developments. When choosing a panel of judges to select five winning paintings from the exhibition, for example, the responsibility was placed on those who worked within a 'European tradition', with the exception of one Australian, who perhaps represented the interests of 'Empire'.⁵⁶ Even an 'advanced' modern artist such as William Gear, who had become aware of recent American art following his exhibition at the Betty Parson's Gallery, New York in 1949, remained resolutely 'European':

Betty Parsons came to Paris, looked me up ... I get a card saying that she was putting me on in an exhibition with one of her artists called Jackson Pollock ... I can't say I ever liked (his work). I saw he was opening up something but it's like an interesting wallpaper - what he does he does well but I ... was still living in Paris. I had been brought up on Léger and Bonnard.⁵⁷

Gear's paintings at the time often consisted of a 'structure' of black lines on to which patches of colour were distributed to provide a rich, textural effect. His work in the immediate post-war period while he lived in Paris demonstrates his association with two groups. The first consisted of European artists such as Asger Jorn, Karel Appel and Constant, grouped under the acronym COBRA. The second were artists, like Jean Bazaine and Alfred Manessier, who represented the tendency of 'abstraction lyrique' or 'tachiste' painting. Stylistically Gear's work is more aligned with the latter group where memory is used as the stimulus for the resulting arrangement of colours and forms, and less by the 'primitive' or 'mythological' interests of the former. What both groups had in common, though, was a belief in 'spontaneity' and the resources of the 'unconscious' for the production of art work. In this respect they would seem to be close to the American Abstract Expressionists, although the work by those centred on Europe was, on the whole, smaller and more restrained. Clive Bell had signalled his doubt in 1935 whether Paris could remain the centre of artistic excellence, and after the war, in 1948, Clement Greenberg had confidently announced that

'...the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States...' ⁵⁸ The important point to note is that there was a flourishing abstract practice in Europe in the post-war period. Although artists in Europe shared, albeit in a limited way, the ideas that motivated their counterparts in America, for artists such as William Gear it was important to defend 'advanced' abstract art as *European*-based.

The function of the Festival of Britain envisaged by the organizers, and the role of art in particular, suggest a defence of 'European' values, but with a significantly different inflexion. The 'European' values upheld by Gear were exemplified by an abstract practice that was 'international' (at least in European terms), 'advanced' and 'experimental'. In the context of the Festival, however, 'advanced' work such as Gear's could easily be accommodated within a 'tradition' of European avant-garde experimentation, although remaining representative of a marginal practice. The mainstream trend of modern British art, in contrast, was identified as 'figurative'. The implication, it would seem, was that the 'tradition' of British art continued to learn from modern developments but avoided its excesses - it was now the turn of Britain to demonstrate the durability of those 'civilized values' embedded in predominantly figurative work.

The 'neo-Romantic' artist Michael Ayrton, a contributor to *60 for '51*, had struck up such a critical position in a series of articles for *The Studio* in 1946. He wrote '...it is to England that the world should now turn its attention'. ⁵⁹ Ayrton's overall thesis on the character of 'English' art and its emerging leadership role expresses a sense of national responsibility that was always present at the Festival:

Great Britain is, I believe, the European nation now most likely to undertake the maintenance of that great and general tradition which has been handed down from country to country throughout history. If British painters hold and cherish this tradition as they show every sign of doing, and if they add to it their own individual and national stamp, then when the torch is handed on again it will be burning well. ⁶⁰

This suggests that the 'civilized' tradition was centred unquestionably on Europe,

and embedded in a history that extended back to classical times. For Ayrton, two British artists whose reputations were established in the thirties and who best exemplified a 'revitalised British art', were Stanley Spencer and Paul Nash. They, along with Wyndham Lewis, were seen as 'the first faint indications of a revival of the indigenous British qualities of line, of mystical and poetic realism and satire'.⁶¹ The 'resurgence' of British art Ayrton talked about in his final article was seen to be evident in the work of, amongst others, Graham Sutherland, Robert Colquhoun, William Scott and John Minton. 'What is important', he wrote:

is that the artists under discussion ... have not, as did many of their elders, made *too much* [Ayrton's emphasis] of the gift from France. They have absorbed what was of value and discarded much that was not.⁶²

Ayrton repeated here the frequently cited claim for the virtue of 'moderation'. For him, at the present time, 'the landscape' provided the best source of inspiration for those seeking to demonstrate the permanence of the 'tradition'. The terms used to state this claim for British 'moderation' and the significance of 'the landscape', clearly demonstrate some continuity with the ideas expressed in Myfanwy Piper's *The Painter's Object* published in the late thirties.

The above survey of art at the Festival provides evidence that those responsible for selecting art shared Ayrton's concern to demonstrate a leadership role for Britain. The function of art was a crucial one in signifying the values, ideas and aspirations underpinning this task. A primary objective at the Festival was essentially a conservative one - to reinforce the notion of 'national identity'. But this was held in tension with a further objective: that Britain should be seen as a country that was engaged with 'new' and 'innovative' ideas associated with 'the modern'. Two issues emerge which will be investigated in the following pages. The first concerns the hostility and criticism which came from a constituency which identified certain modern art at the Festival as conspicuous evidence that those who selected it held ideals and values anathema to 'Britishness'. The second concerns the difficulty facing artists and writers who placed abstraction at the centre of any critical engagement with modern art, and those who were already, in the early fifties, eager to embrace aspects of American culture.

REFERENCES:

- 1 From a letter by Sir Hugh Casson to the author, undated but received on 15 November 1990. See Appendix 3, p311.
- 2 Found in the Misha Black archive, Victoria and Albert Museum Archive, AAD3-1980, Box 2, Boxfile 4.
- 3 Recorded in the minutes of a Design Group meeting, 30 March, 1950, p2, Misha Black archive, *ibid.*
- 4 Dated, 6 March, 1950, Misha Black archives, *ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*, These artists are: J. Aldridge, J Armstrong, M. Ayrton, E. Bawden, E. Burra, W. Coldstream, J. Craxton, R. Furze, I. Hitchens, T. Hillier, Elliot Hodgkin, L. Lamb, R. McBryde, R. Medley, B. Nicholson, V. Pasmore, M. Potter, F. Topolski and J. Tunnard. Barry finishes his memo by saying 'I have omitted the names of a few whose work is, I know, being commissioned'.
- 6 These suggested changes are evident from penned alterations made to the Director General's list, *ibid.*
- 7 Robin Ironside is discussed in Chapter 6, p95.
- 8 Minutes of the Design Group meeting, 30 March, 1950, p2, *op cit.*
- 9 See Chapter 4, p62ff.
- 10 See Chapter 5, p80.
- 11 Minutes of the Design Group meeting, 30 March, 1950, p2, *op cit.*

- 12 Letter from Sir Hugh Casson, op cit., p312.
- 13 See Chapter 3, pp29-30.
- 14 Minutes of Design Group meeting, 30 March, 1950, p2, op cit.
- 15 Those marked 'S' were: J. Aldridge, W. Coldstream, E. Hodgkin, L. Lamb, E. le Bas, E. Ladell, H. Spender and R. Darwin. Those marked 'C' were: Clifford and Rosemary Ellis, R. Eurich, B. Freedman, L. Hurry, J. Minton and C. Mozley. From the minutes of the Design Group, *ibid*.
- 16 Article entitled 'Lion and Unicorn', from the *Souvenir Booklet of the Festival of Britain*, published by the *News Chronicle*. It is unpaginated and unattributed.
- 17 This was its nomenclature in a 'Working list of Nominations for Sculptors and Mural Painters for the South Bank', dated 23 February 1950 and 'revised' 30 March 1950, Misha Black archive, op cit., AAD3-1980, Box 2, Boxfile 4.
- 18 'Lion and Unicorn', op cit.
- 19 Robin Ironside and his book *Painting since 1939*, are discussed in Chapter 6, p95.
- 20 Robin Ironside was considered, but not chosen, for the exhibition '60 for '51'. This exhibition will be discussed at a later point.
- 21 Memorandum from Barry to the Design Group, 6 March 1950, op cit.
- 22 It is recorded in the 'Working list of Nominations for Sculpture an Mural Painters' that John Minton was considered for a mural commission in this pavilion on 'Four Monoliths' (Great Men).

His name is crossed through. Dated 23 February 1950 and 'revised' 30 March 1950, op cit.

- 23 Paintings were: Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, a 'seascape' by Turner, a 'landscape' by Constable, and *Landscape of the Vernal Equinox*, 1943, by Paul Nash.
- 24 This is from a retrospective account by R. D. Russell and Robert Goodden, included in *A Tonic to the Nation - The Festival of Britain 1951*, edited by Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, (London, 1976), p97.
- 25 Herbert Read, 'English Art', first published in *The Burlington Magazine*, (December, 1933). This extract is taken from *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, (London, 1964), pp252-253.
- 26 Pevsner's Reith lectures had developed from a series he first delivered at Birkbeck College, London in 1942. The *Times* described the Reith lectures as 'brilliant' in a leader, 28 November, 1955, p9.
- 27 Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, (Peregrine edition, 1964), p24.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Pevsner writes of the 'preference for the observed fact', op cit., p46, as does Ironside, *Painting since 1939*, op cit., p19.
- 30 Herbert Read, op cit., p258.
- 31 It is significant that the supposed antagonism between 'abstraction' and 'empiricism' was again raised in the most recent retrospective exhibition of twentieth century British art held at the Royal Academy in 1987. For a discussion of this see Chapter 13, p239.

- 32 'The Lion and Unicorn', Souvenir booklet, op cit.
- 33 Herbert Read, 'Paul Nash', an essay written between 1944-49, from *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, op cit., p186. This part of the text was written after the artist's death.
- 34 See, Myfanwy Evans, 'Paul Nash, 1937', *Axis*, 8, early winter 1937, pp12-13. *Axis* is discussed in Chapter 5.
- 35 See, for example, the catalogue essay by Frederick Gore for the exhibition *20th Century British Art - The Modern Movement*, held at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1987. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 13.
- 36 Misha Black, 'Architecture, Art and Design in Unison', *A Tonic to the Nation*, op cit., p82.
- 37 See Chapter 3, p27ff.
- 38 Sculptors used by the Arts Council were: Robert Adams, Reg Butler, Karin Jonzen, Uli Nimitsch, Eduardo Paolozzi, Lynn Chadwick, F.E. McWilliam, Bernard Meadows, Jacob Epstein, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Frank Dobson. Some sculptures stood on the South Bank, others were sited in Battersea Park, and the remainder were included in the exhibition '*60 Paintings for '51*'.
- 39 A.D.B. Sylvester, 'Festival Sculpture', *The Studio*, volume 142, (1951), pp72-77, p75.
- 40 From a letter by Sir Hugh Casson to the author, op cit., p311.
- 41 Misha Black, 'Architecture, Art and Design in Unison', op cit., p83.

- 42 *Ibid.*, p84.
- 43 Francis Klingender, *Marxism and Modern Art*, (London, 1943), p49.
- 44 See Clement Greenberg's essay 'Modernist Painting', first published in 1961. An edited version of this can be found in, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford, 1992), pp754-760.
- 45 From the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, unpaginated. The exhibition was held at the R.B.A. Galleries and opened on 9 August, 1951. The 257 paintings and sculptures were chosen by Grigson, Roland Penrose, Robin Ironside, Ewan Phillips and Benedict Nicholson.
- 46 Held at the ICA, 4 July-31 August, 1951. Apart from Read and Hamilton the organizing committee consisted of J.R.M. Brumwell (Chairman), Ronald Avery, Dr. J. Bronowski, Dr. A. Comfort, E.C. Gregory, Dr. Joseph Needham, Roland Penrose, Ewan Phillips, Prof. C.H. Waddington and Lancelot Law White.
- 47 The exhibition opened at Manchester City Art Gallery, (2 May - 10 June), 1951. It was then shown at the R.B.A. Galleries, London, (22 June-31 July), and subsequently shown in Leicester, Liverpool, Bristol, Norwich, Plymouth, Leeds, Newcastle, Brighton, York and Preston. The tour ended in June 1952.
- 48 The list of artists considered but not invited to exhibit (including Robin Ironside), and the various known reasons why others failed to produce work is documented in the catalogue of the exhibition *25 for '51 - Paintings from the Festival of Britain*, Sheffield City Art Galleries, 17 May - 2 July, 1978. The sculptors exhibiting were: Robert Adams, Reg Butler, Karin Jonzen, Uli Nimpf, Eduardo Paolozzi, Lynn Chadwick, F.E. McWilliam

and Bernard Meadows.

- 49 For a full list, see *ibid.*, p32.
- 50 See Chapter 6, p96.
- 51 Foreword to the exhibition catalogue, *60 Paintings for '51*, (Arts Council, 1951).
- 52 William Gear, one of the participating artists, said: '...the brief was the most open and marvellous briefing - it was no briefing at all ... You were invited to let the Arts Council know what size of canvas you wanted and they provided (it)'. From the transcript of a conversation with the author, 24 November, 1990. See Appendix 4, p315.
- 53 *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May, 1951, p5.
- 54 Philip James, 'Patronage for Painters - 60 Paintings for '51', *The Studio*, volume 142 (1951), p47.
- 55 Transcript of conversation with William Gear, *op cit.*, p320.
- 56 The judges were Jonkheer. W. Sandberg (Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), Mr A.J.L. McDonell (Advisor to the Felton Bequest, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) and Mr Alan Clutton-Brock (art critic of *The Times*). The five winners are discussed in Chapter 9.
- 57 Transcript of conversation with William Gear, *op cit.*, p318.
- 58 Clement Greenberg, 'The Decline of Cubism', first published in 1948. This quotation is from *Art in Theory*, *op cit.*, p572. Bell's view is discussed more fully in Chapter 3 of this study, pp25-26.
- 59 Michael Ayton, 'The Heritage of British Painting', *The Studio*,

volume 132, August-November, 1946, p108. This was from a series of four articles headed : 'Continuity', pp32-39; 'Inferiority Complex', pp65-72; 'Cosmopolitanism', pp102-110; and 'Resurgence', pp144-149.

60 Ibid., p149.

61 Ibid., p145.

62 Ibid., p148.

CHAPTER 9

'Britain' at the Festival of Britain: sceptred isle or armoured womb?

It has already been discussed how, once the Festival had opened, most opposition in the newspapers to the overall staging of the event ceased. Yet attacks on the Festival art grew more trenchant and the issues raised ran in newspapers from April 1951 until almost the close of the year.¹ Many clearly believed that art was the bearer of values and ideals which were fundamental to the construction of 'national identity', and 'bad' art could not go unchallenged. It is no real surprise that the most contentious art was the 'modern' and attacks against its alleged 'anti-Britishness' were sometimes particularly acrimonious.

The modern art arousing the greatest conflict was that which failed to clearly depict recognizable objects, people, etc., and William Gear was singled out for the fiercest criticism. One reason for this was that Gear, unlike all the other artists, apart from Victor Pasmore, had painted a resolutely abstract picture which contained no obvious visual 'clues' to help a viewer understand it in terms of its title - *Autumn Landscape*. A second reason was that Gear's painting had been selected as a prize-winner by the Arts Council.² As a result of this award *Autumn Landscape* became the focus for a broader attack on the Council itself. This will be discussed later. At this point it is criticism from conservatives on the political Right which will be considered, and then it will be necessary to consider attitudes from the political Left. Four main issues raised by those on the Right concerning modern art will be discussed here. It is significant that these are the same issues that were seen to focus debate and controversy during the earlier discussion of the thirties. The first is that modern art is 'elitist' and inaccessible to the 'ordinary' man. The second is that modern art, by its alleged rejection of 'tradition' and 'authority' poses a threat to 'Britishness'. The third is the belief that modern art, and more particularly abstract art, is 'anti-humanist' and thus anathema to the 'civilized values' held to be at the core of 'Britishness'. And lastly, that modern art betokens 'corporatism'. For many on the Right 'corporatism' and 'Britishness' were incompatible.

Dealing first with the general accusation of 'elitism', Gear's abstract painting *Autumn Landscape*, was seen as representative of work promoted by a self-

appointed intellectual elite who showed contempt for 'the people'. General Sir Hugh Gough wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*, assuming the role of guardian of 'the people': 'I think it is important that the public should realise the disgust which very many people in England feel for such displays of so-called art ... it ... is a positive insult to the intelligence'.³

The response to this took two different forms, both of which appeal to the right of artistic and intellectual freedom. Edith Sitwell, for example, did nothing to deny 'elitism' but replied with 'Bloomsbury' scorn against what she perceived as a vulgar and stultifying form of conservatism. She praised Gear for his 'restraint' in the matter and attacked the 'military', a favourite target of Bloomsbury, for their 'underbred manners' and general insensitivity.⁴ In some contrast to Sitwell, Ben Nicholson took a didactic approach to such criticism. He appealed to the intelligence of 'the public' by explaining to them the objectives of the modern artist. He ended: 'So when "the public" read one of these writers who attacks all modern art, let them remember that the *experts do not agree with him* [Nicholson's emphasis]'.⁵

Nicholson's reply raises two points. The first concerns his appeal to the authority of institutional figures, such as Kenneth Clark, to validate 'good' art. It seems odd to cite the Director of the National Gallery as an arbiter on modern art, although Nicholson's comment probably reflects the stage in his own career where his form of abstraction had at least found some institutional acceptance. The second point to note is that Nicholson's efforts to explain abstract art would have helped little more than Sitwell's in allaying the accusation of 'elitism' expressed by his critics. As one correspondent to the *Daily Telegraph* commented: 'We who are not professionals are not disqualified from speaking merely because we refuse to be confounded with the pretentious jargon with which painting ... is plagued'.⁶

The second accusation aimed at abstract art was that it was a threat to 'traditional British values'. The contrast between the descriptive title of Gear's painting, *Autumn Landscape*, and its 'abstract' handling, provided a trigger for criticism of this sort. The work was interpreted by some as a wilful transgression of the British landscape tradition, and by implication of 'traditional British values' in general: 'I was appalled at the sight of the picture ... English landscape has

been translated for us in all its moods by great painters of the past...'⁷ Others expected the landscape to represent all that was familiar and consoling: 'Lovers of Nature's tranquil sweetness in autumn were bound to be affronted by its utter unreality'.⁸ The fact that Gear, in their view, had travestied, or indeed violated, 'the British countryside' provides a further example of the extent to which ideological values, such as 'tradition' and 'permanence' were seen to reside in the landscape.

Another strategy for those wanting to demonstrate how 'alien' abstract painting was to 'British values' was to subject it to the same kind of ridicule witnessed in the previous discussion of the Picasso exhibition.⁹ Typical examples are Gear's painting being reproduced beside a photograph of a square of linoleum with the comment: 'Members were impressed by the linoleum, which they considered showed strength and depth'; and Nicholson's painting being described as 'the product of ... a touch of liver'.¹⁰

One response to this sort of attack came from Philip James, Art Director of the Arts Council who appeared conciliatory: 'It seems clear that abstract paintings ... should be given titles without literary allusions such as *Composition in Green and Brown*.'¹¹ Gear seemed bemused by the degree of hostility shown towards his work. It was common-place for 'lyrical abstract' painters, such as Gear, and his French colleagues Bazaine and Manessier, to produce work in response to the memory of a landscape. He later claimed that there was nothing disingenuous about the title - it was based on experience:

...we found this cottage in ... Buckinghamshire ... it was in the Autumn ... and I did a number of paintings called *Autumn Landscape*. I had *Autumn Landscape*, numbers 1,2 and 3 - smaller versions .. I can still remember going in and about the ... beech woods around there, it's lovely country ... I would go into the woods and pick up sticks for the fire.¹²

The third claim against modern 'abstract' art was that it provided evidence of an anti-humanist politics which posed a threat to the fabric of British society. By May 1951, before *60 Paintings for '51* had opened to the public, Gear's painting had already become part of a broader political debate. Edgar Granville, a

Conservative Member of Parliament, asked the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Gaitskell, in the House of Commons:

...if he was aware that the recent purchase by the Arts Council of *Autumn Landscape* and three [sic] other paintings was causing dissatisfaction; that these paintings were not representative of British Art.¹³

A correspondent in the *Daily Telegraph* made more explicit the relationship that was believed to exist between modern art and contemporary society:

It is the ideology of Mr Gear that is at fault ... Abstract painting is no more sensible than abstract politics (of which we have had enough).¹⁴

This idea that much modern art reflected, and perhaps even encouraged a general malaise in society, became a familiar theme at the time, and did not only come from the political Right. This was apparent from the occasion of the Royal Academy Banquet in 1951 when Lord Samuel, the Liberal leader of the House of Lords, spoke about modern art on behalf of the guests. Modern art, Lord Samuel said, reflected a time of unrest in British society where, 'There were few principles and standards generally accepted, few basic traditions that remained unchallenged'.¹⁵ Modern artists did no more, he continued, than behave in the 'confused' fashion of society at large: 'Theories of painting have emerged that are deliberately irrational and anarchic'.¹⁶

The fact that a Liberal was speaking here confirms what has been seen so far in this study - that is, conservative views regarding the role of art in society do not conform to simple party political divisions. Perhaps it also suggests that on this occasion Lord Samuel, the representative of one traditional British institution, the House of Lords, addressing another such institution, the Royal Academy, had little choice but to strike a conservative note.

Lord Samuel suggested a specific role for art:

If the age has in it ugly features - and who will deny it? - the

business of the artist should be not to add to the ugliness but for him, of all men, to strive to redeem it by works of beauty.¹⁷

He is advocating here that art practice should be disengaged from contingent social, political and economic conditions. In his view, the specific role of art was to reproduce certain values and ideals held to be 'natural' and beyond the interests of politics and power.

Lord Samuel's general pessimism about 'modern art' and the 'proper' role of art found an echo in an editorial in *The Studio*. Here 'great' art was described as analogous to religious experience in the search to express 'truth':

The world as seen by the so-called 'modern painter' and sculptor is a synthetic, cynical world ... The great masterpieces which have stood the test of time have one thing in common. Each is an act of worship and faith in something greater than the human being...¹⁸

This editorial suggested that there are certain irrefutable values underpinning a stable British society. Modern artists seek wilfully to destroy these values, whereas the proper function of Art is to conserve and reproduce them.

This sort of claim for art is often made alongside a defence of certain existing structures of authority, which, it is argued, are essential for preserving the 'civilized' values central to 'Britishness'. Underlying such a defence, it seems, was the fear that modern art undermined the structures of power and authority which some artists and critics had an interest in maintaining. This situation bears some resemblance to the nineteen thirties discussed in an earlier chapter, when professional artists' organizations took issue with the new network of patronage for 'modern' art.¹⁹

With regard to the fifties, many of the critics saw 'modern art' betokening a burgeoning 'corporatism' in society. This is the last of the claims against modern art that were listed earlier, and Gear was again the target. Shortly after his painting had become the centre of controversy, he realised that many of his fiercest critics were using him as a means of attacking the Arts Council itself. He

put this in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*: 'Using as their motto "Any stick to beat a dirty dog", they seek to discredit a government sponsored body by abusing the object of its attentions without justification'.²⁰ A trenchant attack was made against the Arts Council which continued in the correspondence pages of *The Times* for four months.²¹ At the outset a united front of the presidents of ten professional artists societies presented themselves against the Council.²²

At first it was their own lack of representation on the Arts Council committee that drew accusations of undemocratic behaviour.²³ An immediate response followed from Ernest Pooley, the Chairman of the Council, who detailed the membership of the committee.²⁴ This initial attack by the presidents proved to be motivated more by the perceived need to quickly establish a position of authority, rather than by the studied views of their membership. Within a week Hans Feibusch and John Hutton, committee members of the Society of Mural Painters, expressed their gratitude for the Council's recent funding of the Society, and dissociated themselves from the views of Augustus John who had co-signed as one of the presidents without consulting them.²⁵ Augustus John's reply demonstrated his ignorance of the situation. He apologised for not having been aware of the Council's patronage of the Society and confessed that he had only signed the letter at all because he believed there to be no practising artists on the Arts Council committee.²⁶

A more persistent accusation levelled by the Societies was that the Council was interfering with the established structures of art patronage. Following the joint letter this was taken up by two presidents writing independently. The first was W. Russell Flint who repeated the claim that the Council was 'acting in a partisan manner prejudicial to the great body of living artists of all schools throughout the country'.²⁷ W.C.H. King, on behalf of the Royal Society of Sculptors, followed in a similar vein insisting that the threat to practising artists provided evidence that there were 'grave issues at stake'.²⁸ Once again, this parallels the arguments surrounding *Unit One* in the thirties.²⁹ Critics at both times suggested that the 'true' artist was the 'professional' who earned a living by responding to public demand. In contrast much experimental art was deemed by these critics as 'amateur', in the pejorative sense, and unworthy of state support. The professional art societies were intent on conserving the status quo. This meant opposing 'the modern' and challenging any change in art patronage, such as the

support given to experimental art by the Arts Council.

When the Arts Council was established in 1946 its charter stated that it should '... develop a greater knowledge and understanding of the arts, and ... improve the standard of execution'.³⁰ With regard to the Festival of Britain this was interpreted as a need to foster new art. This provided a source of patronage for modern artists that was otherwise unavailable. William Gear commented in retrospect on the difficulty of finding dealers for avant-garde work: 'There was Gimpels and to some extent the Redfern at the time, but I can't think of any other galleries ... Again, there were probably no more than half a dozen collectors'.³¹ A letter co-signed by the Penwith Society of Arts in Cornwall, including Hepworth and Nicholson, made this point at the time. The letter also reveals their understanding that 'the grave issues at stake' amounted to a contest over structures of power and authority:

The nine [sic] attacking institutions were formed in an age of private and Royal patronage, and were consolidated long before the present social crisis. They are therefore possessed of their own premises and means of showing their work to the public ... The Arts Council has accepted the challenge and the responsibility for keeping alive those experimental artists who choose to work outside institutional sanctuary.³²

Beyond the narrow accusation that it was unrepresentative of professional practice, the Presidents, and those who joined in to support their view, asserted that the Arts Council was motivated by values which were a threat to British society. For W. Russell Flint there was unequivocal evidence that the Council were politically motivated: 'The art panel of the Arts Council acts as a left-wing art committee. No further demonstration of that is required'.³³

Judging from the discussion so far it would clearly be mistaken to accept Russell Flint's characterization of both the Arts Council, and by extension the organizers of the Festival itself, as the proponents of radical, Left-wing principles. Indeed there were those on the Left who felt that the Arts Council had moved too far to the Right! This was certainly the view held by Paul Hogarth, an illustrator and member of the AIA, who wrote an essay for *Marxism Quarterly* in 1955 on the

state of British Art.³⁴ Hogarth's essay further exemplifies a critical position already observed in this study: that is, the claim from the Left for a national art that is truly 'realist'. Of particular significance, though, is that the terms Hogarth uses to make his case against modern art appear to resonate with those coming from the political Right. One of these was the imputation that much modern art is 'elitist'.

The case against 'elitism' had been part of a more general Marxist discourse on post-war British art already established by fellow AIA member Francis Klingender in his booklet *Marxism and Modern Art - an approach to Social Realism*, published in 1943. It was the third in a series of booklets designed to 'help us go forward together with our Soviet Allies to victory over Fascism and a general advance in human freedom and happiness'.³⁵ Klingender's essay was a clear exposition of the case for social realism as proposed by the pre-war AIA, and against the flawed 'idealism' he saw inherent in Roger Fry's aesthetics. For Klingender the search for 'pure form' had led to a refusal of the 'real' world: 'Their conception of good art and of its relation to life is thus incompatible with the present need of reuniting art and the people'.³⁶ He was not prescriptive about the particular subjects or techniques for the realist art he advocated but argued for the general principle that: 'Realism, the attitude of the artist who strives to reflect some essential aspect of reality and to face the problems set by life, is from its very nature popular'.³⁷

Within this more general case for 'realist' art Hogarth looked back at the wartime as a period when 'Art came out of the museums and galleries' and when it 'was generally characterised by a fundamental concern for reality'.³⁸ He believed that the Arts Council, in contrast, had failed to maintain contact with 'the working class' but merely reflected 'the changed artistic tastes and values of the ruling class, expressed in the encouragement and patronage of abstract art'.³⁹ Hogarth's criticism of the Arts Council was quite unlike that coming from the Right, although the general accusation of 'elitism' was common to both Right and Left. Ironically, the Right saw the Arts Council's support of 'elitist' abstract art as symptomatic of the subversive tendencies of Socialist intellectuals, while those on the Left saw it as evidence that the Arts Council, and the post-war Labour Government, had failed the working class.

The fact that 'abstract art' can signify different things to the Right and Left demonstrates how different ideological positions are established by contesting certain widely shared values and ideals. This can be further shown with reference to Hogarth's essay. Art during the war he wrote: '...was an art national in flavour, aware of tradition yet seeking to invigorate that tradition ... asserting its true social function in the life of the nation'. The art that was needed now, he continued, would contain the qualities of 'accessibility and humanism'.⁴⁰ In summary, Hogarth argued for British art that demonstrated national identity and a respect for 'tradition'; that is art for 'the people' in contrast to the 'anti-humanism' of much modern art.

In most respects this is the same cluster of arguments used by those on the Right. The crucial difference emerges from the way these values and ideals are articulated through the sort of art that is upheld as exemplary. For those on the Right 'the landscape' was regarded as a central motif, exemplifying important values such as 'tradition' and 'stability'. It is not suggested here that a preference for images of 'the landscape' always betrays a Right wing position - this is clearly not the case and the complex values attached to 'the landscape' have been a recurring theme throughout this present study. However, the foregoing discussion of Gear's *Autumn Landscape* provides an instance of the uproar that can issue from the Right if the supposed meanings and values deposited in 'the British landscape' are seen to be violated.

In contrast, for those on the Left, such as Hogarth, exemplary art was 'realist' and often depicted working people: 'A humanist art', he wrote, 'can only thrive on the support and encouragement of the people it portrays'.⁴¹ Such art had to be accessible both in terms of subject-matter and availability. By these criteria Hogarth adjudged Cliff Rowe's murals at the the Electrical Trades Union College at Esher, 'an important and outstanding example of trade union patronage of progressive art'.⁴²

In terms of the value placed on 'tradition' and the advocacy of figurative as opposed to abstract art, those from both the Right and the Left appeared to be sharing an artistically conservative position. However, one vital difference rests on the use of the term 'tradition'. For the Right it seems to mean the need to preserve 'stability' and the existing structures of authority and deference in

society. For the Left it was an act of liberation - restoring to the working class a tradition that had been 'concealed' by the 'ruling class'. The Arts Council, and by extension Gerald Barry and the Design Group as well, thus found themselves attacked from both directions for their use of abstract art. From the Right 'abstract art' was seen as evidence that socialism was on the move and the stability of society was under threat. From the Left it was evidence that the Labour Party had capitulated and, through the Arts Council and the support of abstract art, pandered to bourgeois taste.

The fact that the activities of Gerald Barry, the Design Group and the Arts Council could attract such conflicting accusations perhaps testifies to two things. The first is the attention this draws to the cluster of values and ideals that were being fought over at the Festival of Britain and the central role that art, and 'modern' art especially, was seen to play. Secondly, it suggests that one of the key tasks for the organizers of the Festival was to manage this difficult ideological terrain centred on the task of defining national identity.

One of the hallmarks of art used at the Festival, and this includes the use of abstract art, was that overall it served to register the effort of the organizers to be both 'British' and 'modern'. Paul Nash's essay of 1935, 'Going Modern and Being British' finds some echo in this context. Nash expressed the struggle he had found in reconciling the demands of being both 'modern' and 'British', and it is this same difficulty that appeared to be facing the organizers of the Festival. The 'modern' and the 'British' were a crucial pairing, with the 'modern' being invoked as the source of innovation necessary to invigorate society. This was encapsulated in Gerald Barry's claim that the Festival should be viewed as, 'an incentive to new effort and achievement. It must be used as a springboard'.⁴³ Elsewhere Philip James, speaking on behalf of the Arts Council, declared for art a role as part of a larger programme of social change: 'Here too was the moment to encourage public bodies of many kinds to realise their responsibilities as art patrons in the welfare state'.⁴⁴ Art is thus seen by these men, and one would also assume by all those who selected art at the Festival, as part of the vision of responsible cultural liberals. These views resonate with the aspirations of Maynard Keynes who, in 1930, placed modern art at the centre of social progress: '...if only the public could learn to enjoy as they deserve to be enjoyed the many delightful and beautiful things which the artists of their own age ... are

offering them, it would be a great improvement'.⁴⁵

Keynes was an important advocate for the integration of cultural and social life, whose reputation reached its peak in the fifties when his economic theories were put into practice. His involvement in a wide range of cultural activities, in addition to his work on economics, testify to Keynes' influence across a range of social practices. Among these could be listed: his association with Bloomsbury in the twenties, and his underwriting of the London Artists' Association; and his chairmanship of the CEMA in 1942, along with his advocacy of the Arts Council. In brief, Keynes was committed to that same cluster of liberal ideals that were embodied in the activities of Bloomsbury, and also shared by the key organizers at the Festival. It would be inaccurate to represent those who shared many of the same liberal ideals as a coherent group: individuals involved in the Festival such as Misha Black and Herbert Read, for example, would clearly have felt antagonistic towards Bloomsbury. Yet the reason for this antagonism might have been, as suggested above, the perception of Bloomsbury as anachronistic and, perhaps, socially exclusive. This in itself is significant because what served as the basis for a congruence of ideas for this broad liberal constituency, was a positive attitude towards 'the modern' which by definition was subject to change. Moreover, culture in general, and art in particular, was considered by this liberal constituency as an essential means of expressing 'modern' ideas.

In Britain at this time, however, there remained some equivocation among this liberal constituency. Although there was an outward effort by liberals to embrace modern developments and innovations, this was moderated by a conviction that such 'progress' should not be unbridled. In a general sense this can be seen by referring again to Keynes. Political and cultural management was necessary, Keynes wrote in 1936, so that: '...we should attain the conditions of a quasi-stationary community where change and progress would result only from changes in technique, taste, population and institutions'.⁴⁶ While Keynes reflects here a Bloomsbury contempt for profit-making motives, the change and progress he is advocating is not un-restrained but carefully managed.

One other sense in which British liberal attitudes towards 'the modern' were moderated relates specifically to art. Herbert Read can be seen as a case in point. He has been seen throughout this study as a key figure and apologist for

modern art from the thirties through to the fifties, and during the controversy over Picasso's 1945 exhibition in London he entered into correspondence in defence of the artist.⁴⁷ His attitude towards Picasso was consistent with his pre-war reputation for encouraging all new, innovative art: 'I will try to explain modern painting and sculpture; and in general I am content to serve art, and not to judge it'.⁴⁸ His previous support for the 'revolutionary' potential of modern artists as crucial agents in the advancement of society was reiterated in a 1948 article when he described art as a 'consistent revolutionary attitude', and the artist as an initiator who 'invents new symbols, perhaps a whole new symbolic system'.⁴⁹ In this view of modern art as a dynamic force for change Read considered Picasso to be the 'most convenient prototype' of the revolutionary artist.⁵⁰

Yet if the above is compared with an extract from Read's writing from 1951 his revolutionary claims seem to be tempered by caution and moderation:

Art cannot be confined within frontiers - it lives only if continually subjected to foreign invasions, to migrations and transplantations. But if art's vitality comes from the cross-breeding of styles, its strength comes from stability, from roots that grow deep into a native soil ... the genius of our [England's] greatest painters and architects ... was always romantic. In that sense the general trend of contemporary art may be interpreted as a return to our romantic tradition.⁵¹

If both Keynes and Read are taken as typical spokesmen of a liberal constituency it is apparent that their ideals and values embody a tension. On the one hand the invocation of 'Britishness' turns to the security of 'tradition' and 'stability', while on the other support of 'the modern' requires an affirmation of 'innovation' and 'change'. For this liberal constituency an acceptance of 'the modern' stands as an important marker of 'progress'. British culture, of which modern art is a part, is seen as an instrument of change. But pulling at this is the restraint exercised through 'management' and the familiar invocation of 'Britishness'. It would seem, therefore, that among this liberal constituency there was always a tendency pulling towards a more artistically conservative position.

It is from within this constituency, with both the ideals and tensions that this

involved, that those chief organizers of the Festival of Britain can be placed. The Festival itself became an important site for establishing the cultural and political authority of this constituency, while also providing the arena for it to be contested. It has been seen that the most serious challenge came from the political Right. What emerges as being of crucial importance to both the liberal 'centre' and the 'Right' was the need to vigorously contest 'Britishness'. 'National identity' remained central in any attempt to mobilize popular consent for particular cultural and political positions. Certain common values for 'Britishness', such as 'individualism' and 'freedom', were shared by all those who contested it. These values were articulated and re-articulated by different groups to consolidate and affirm their own respective ideology as the more 'naturally' 'British'.

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated that it was largely representatives of this liberal constituency who championed modern British art, particularly abstract art, and who affirmed more positively 'the modern' in general. But it has also been demonstrated that this same constituency's invocation of and commitment to 'Britishness' had the effect of tempering, or indeed undermining a commitment to 'the modern'. As already suggested those aspects of 'the modern' that were often greeted with both repulsion and fear could be evoked in the single word 'America'. In an article published in 1945 Keynes wrote: 'Let every part of Merry England be merry in its own way. Death to Hollywood'.⁵² This encapsulates well the contempt felt towards American popular culture and the threat it was seen to pose to the integrity of 'Britishness'. Keynes' remark did not pass unnoticed but found a response from the American United Artists Corporation who asked if this amounted to 'a declaration of war'.⁵³ Despite the restraint and caution exercised by the liberal-minded towards modern British art, exemplified well at the Festival of Britain, this constituency had remained the modern British artist's best chance of patronage, often in the face of intense criticism from both the Right and Left. But in Britain during the early fifties the impetus for modern artistic developments, and indeed for modern cultural developments in general, came from just the quarter that was feared most - America.

The Independent Group and British abstract artists in the early fifties.

In Britain during the early fifties it was a younger generation of artists and writers

who were prepared to engage with the products of American culture. Many of them were associated with the 'Independent Group' (IG), an offshoot of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA). The ICA had been formed in May 1946 after initially being proposed by Herbert Read (who was to become its director), Roland Penrose, Peggy Guggenheim and others. It was established in London in 1950.⁵⁴ In 1952 a committee of 'young members' formed who felt that their interests were not best represented by the 'parent' group.⁵⁵ Read's key presence here demonstrates his continued importance for the development of British modern art, but the attitude of these 'young members' suggest that he was now perceived as part of a conservative establishment. In 1952 the title 'Independent Group' had been adopted as a banner for organizing lectures and events.⁵⁶

The writer and critic Lawrence Alloway stands as an important figure at this juncture for his ability to champion two developing strands of modern British art. The first was his role in helping to rekindle an interest in British abstract art, which had been marginalized particularly since the mid-thirties. The second was his service as an articulate spokesman for the ideals of the IG. Between them these two developing strands served to raise three important questions. 1. What values was it necessary to stand for and against? 2. What were the characteristics of modern art practice which needed restating? And 3. What were the 'modern' issues with which they were engaging?

The composition of the IG itself addressed the first of these questions. Initially there was a committee consisting of the writers Lawrence Alloway, Toni del Renzio and Peter Reyner Banham, the artists Richard Hamilton, John McHale and Eduardo Paolozzi, and the architect Peter Smithson. To this list Alloway added as 'leading artists' associated with the group Magda Cordell and William Turnbull, and the writers Theo Crosby and Roger Coleman.⁵⁷ It was important, said Alloway, that 'Mc Hale and I rejected infiltration or dominion by any established forms of university culture ... none of the main agents of the IG had been formed through traditional British university lore'.⁵⁸ For them university culture 'cultivated a posture of detachment and nonchalance and it maintained a class- or education-bound dislike of popular culture'.⁵⁹ Alloway's comments are part of a retrospective statement which requires a cautious appraisal, but his view nevertheless captures something of the oppositional posture of the IG. 'University culture', for Alloway, connoted 'patrician', 'polite', 'conservative',

'tasteful' and an opposition to 'popular art'. In short, everything that the Festival of Britain stood for and the IG stood against.

Alloway commented that consequently an antagonism was felt in the IG for the forms of 'modern art' upheld by leading members of the ICA. He recalled that, 'Sir Roland's [Penrose] taste was pro-School of Paris, and I persistently criticized Picasso, whom he admired especially'.⁶⁰ Of Read he wrote, 'Roger Fry and Herbert Read ... were not my culture heroes ... Significant form, design, vision, order, composition, etc., were seen as high level abstractions, floating above the pictures like ill-fitting haloes'.⁶¹ The critical differences between Fry and Read have already been discussed in this present study, but for Alloway they were two of a kind. That is, they were both representatives of the 'establishment' who exercised a conservative 'taste' within the narrow confines of 'high art', yet who remained either silent or hostile in the face of 'popular culture'.

An example of the IG's somewhat ambivalent relationship with the 'art establishment' is apparent from their exhibition *Growth and Form*, organized as part of the Festival of Britain, and held at the ICA.⁶² Although it was finally organized by Richard Hamilton alone, he had discussed with Paolozzi and Henderson his plans for the 'young members' contribution to the Festival.⁶³ The organizing committee consisted largely of scientists and the exhibition was unconventional in its content, assembling images of the structures found in astronomy, science and nature, and omitting any 'fine art'.⁶⁴ The layout of the exhibition was also unusual, with a scaffolding of screens supporting images at different heights. Read, in his foreword to the catalogue, believed this exhibition revealed that: 'Knowledge of form is the key to understanding not only in science but also in art'. This concern for identifying those 'common principles' which inform a range of human activities dates back to his advocacy of *Unit One* in the thirties.⁶⁵ Indeed the exhibition title itself was taken from a book of the same title by D'Arcy Thompson, widely read by artists in the thirties, such as Henry Moore. This book had provided for these artists a theoretical framework for understanding the underlying structural principles which were believed to exist behind appearances.⁶⁶

It is revealing that Reyner Banham, in a contemporary review, found the exhibition 'exciting' and 'difficult' but not for the same reasons as Read.⁶⁷ Unlike

Read he asserted that: 'Aesthetic value is not inherent in any object, but in its human usage...'. For Reyner Banham the exhibition provided a challenge to the usual expectations of 'high art' and invited the viewer to interrogate the work and make new connections between life and art: 'Boldly, this exhibition stakes everything on its visual qualities, nothing is labelled, analogies and resemblances are not enforced, one is left to draw one's own conclusions'. It would seem that, to some extent, Read had misrepresented the IG. At this stage in the early fifties, when the ideas of the IG were still tentative, Read could misconstrue their more iconoclastic intentions, and still evaluate their work and ideas by means of his own 'high art' aesthetic criteria. It was not that those artists associated with the IG were *rejecting* either 'high art' or 'aesthetics' but they were claiming that the criteria for evaluating both required revision.

By 1953, though, the ideas emerging from the exhibition *Growth and Form* which challenged Read's 'high art' aesthetic had become more crystallized. They were more fully developed in the exhibition *Parallel of Art and Life*.⁶⁸ Here, photographic images were juxtaposed:

(not) to form a consecutive statement. Instead they will establish the intricate series of cross relationships between different fields of art and technics. Touching off a wide range of associations and offering fruitful analogies.⁶⁹

Reyner Banham considered the exhibition to be the *locus classicus* of a 'new Brutalism' which was regarded by some critics as '...the deliberate flouting of the traditional concepts of photographic beauty, of a cult of ugliness, and "denying the spiritual in Man"'.⁷⁰ At first the management of the ICA was reluctant to stage the exhibition, believing it to be rather incoherent.⁷¹ Nigel Henderson recalled in retrospect: 'We didn't want Herbert Read to open it, because he seemed automatically to be doing everything, and I think we had some fairly bumptious ideas'.⁷²

The IG, then, demonstrate vividly that strand of modern art practice in Britain during the early fifties which addressed the first of the questions proposed above: that is - what values was it necessary to stand for and against? In summary, the IG represented a group of young artists who attempted to re-formulate the

aesthetics which underpinned a modern art practice in the early fifties. For them, a major obstacle to overcome was the established and outdated distinction prevailing in Britain between 'high art' and 'popular culture'.

To investigate the second question - what were the characteristics of modern art practice that some felt it necessary to restate? - it is necessary to turn to the practice of certain British abstract artists at the time.

In general terms the impetus for restating certain 'modern' requirements for art practice was based on the perception by some that British modern art had become parochial and conservative. A clear statement of this belief was made in the book *Nine Abstract Artists*.⁷³ Although published in 1954 some of the work illustrated dates back to 1950. The 'nine' in question were Robert Adams, Terry Frost, Adrian Heath, Anthony Hill, Roger Hilton, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, Victor Pasmore and William Scott. Like the IG many of these artists held an ambivalent attitude towards the 'art establishment'. Adams, Pasmore and Scott, for example, had undertaken commissions for the Festival of Britain. None of the nine artists were associated with the IG, although it was Alloway who wrote the introductory essay for the volume. In this text he made clear the collaborative nature of the publication, and his role in it: 'It was not my idea to collect these reproductions and statements together - the first move was made by the artists concerned. They do not constitute a movement although six of the nine do belong to a single, loosely knit group'.⁷⁴ Alloway concluded his essay by stating the distinctiveness of these artists: 'On the whole, British non-figurative art stands apart from the prevailing British style which continues to be a form of nature-romanticism'.⁷⁵

The book contained a statement by each artist, accompanied by a short biography and illustrations of their work. With the exception of Anthony Hill, who was only twenty-four at the time, the other artists ranged between thirty-four and forty-nine and all had established professional careers as artists and teachers.

Alloway's essay provided a context for these artists. It was written not as a manifesto for a determinate abstract art practice but was exploratory, seeking to sketch the parameters, and indicate the tensions, ambiguities and possibilities of such a practice. He divided the artists into two main categories: through their

geometric abstractions and development of relief work and mobiles Pasmore, the Martins, Hill and Adams, were described as those 'who pick up the intentions and character of *Circle*'.⁷⁶ Pasmore, Kenneth Martin and Hill were also identified as 'concerned with the ideas of technology',⁷⁷ with Pasmore cited as particularly praise-worthy as an artist who 'constantly remakes his career'.⁷⁸ The other artists were identified as those employing 'irrational expression by *malerisch* [painterly] means'.⁷⁹ It is interesting that Alloway observed in this range of abstract work a new international spirit uniting the interests of artists across Europe and America.⁸⁰

What united the work of the 'nine' and, by implication, the range of abstract art he referred to in Europe and America was that 'most of them resisted "the distraction of the external"'.⁸¹ For Alloway this resistance remained an attribute of modern art practice which was important to keep alive. But although he identified 'abstraction' as an art practice that was often able to resist parochialism and conservatism, he also felt that this position was never secure. He drew particular attention to the problem of 'absolutes' and expressed it in this way: 'It is essential to distinguish between "absolute" as a mystical class of fixed ends and "absolute" as concrete'.⁸² The first of these two usages he believed to be fallacious because it led to the claim that art can express 'a kind of pure core' of 'truth', which provides 'the means to a high world'.⁸³ For Alloway, the avant-garde ideals of *Unit One*, formulated by Ben Nicholson, Paul Nash and Herbert Read had faltered along these lines and these thirties avant-gardists had 'either become romantics' or become 'tired of their thirtyish purity'.⁸⁴ Alloway acknowledged the difficulty of overcoming these 'obstinate absolutes' and saw Hilton as an artists wrestling with them.⁸⁵ The kind of 'absolute' which Alloway considered to be the only legitimate pursuit of the artists was concerned with 'the status of the work of art itself'.⁸⁶ A painting, Alloway said, '...is the result of a unique encounter of an artist and his materials. The artist is a man painting, not a man using paint for an extra-artistic purpose'.⁸⁷

Through his assertion that the artist should not seek to express ideas *through* painting Alloway was making a claim for the 'autonomy' of art. If modern artists sought and claimed to express metaphysical 'truth', he implied, their work would serve society by maintaining conservative ideals and aspirations. In Alloway's view, then, 'autonomy' was a necessary defence against such incorporation. He

traced the demise of 'autonomy' in the development of British modern art - from *Unit One*, through *Axis*, to the present Romantic artists. The latter he described as '...the loyal men and the dreamy boys [who] developed an imagery of landscape which implied a kind of dark, meditative patriotism. The sceptred isle became an armoured womb'.⁸⁸

Alloway's claim for the autonomy of art practice, and for the importance of abstract art finds resonance with the ideas of the American art critic Clement Greenberg. In 1939 Greenberg wrote the essay, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch'. Although Greenberg's writing would not have been widely circulated in Britain in the early fifties, this particular essay was published in the English journal, *Horizon*, in 1940. It might reasonably be speculated that Alloway would have read it there. In his essay Greenberg made a similar case for 'absolutes' and for the importance of abstraction:

It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at 'abstract' or 'nonobjective' art - and poetry, too ... The nonrepresentational or 'abstract', if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extroverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated themselves.⁸⁹

Both Alloway and Greenberg, then, established a claim for the autonomy of art practice by emphasising the importance of the artist's attention to the medium itself, rather than through reference to the 'external' world. Both also claimed for abstract art an important historical role in preserving art as a unique form of expression in the face of ideological incorporation. As Greenberg put it in another essay, written in 1940:

The arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be

emphasized.⁹⁰

Although it is not surprising that Alloway referred to Greenberg as 'an art critic and a good one...' the critical positions of the two men conflict significantly at another point.⁹¹ This will be discussed shortly. To summarise the answer to the second question, though, there is evidence that in England during the early fifties some artists and critics retained a critical edge by asserting artistic autonomy as a means of resisting ideological incorporation. Alloway believed that the value of abstract art, lay in its ability to draw the viewer's attention to the work of art itself, rather than to any external 'meaning'. Although he identified abstract art as an exemplary critical practice, he also remained cautious. Alloway saw autonomy as an objective for artists to work towards rather than something that had already been achieved.

One final question to be asked of the artists discussed so far is, what 'modern' issues were they engaging with? It has already been seen that the Festival of Britain asserted a particular sense of 'Britishness' which offered an implicit challenge to 'America', while at other times criticism of 'America' was clear and explicit. In some contrast then those artists who engaged with 'America' saw it as a way of reconstituting the 'internationalism' lost during the war and in the post-war years. An acceptance of 'America', however, was not unconditional. Toni del Renzio retrospectively attempted to characterise the position of the IG by describing them as having a 'vague leftish sympathy but it often seemed to be swamped by a fierce 'Americanism', an admiration for American technology rather than conscious approval of American foreign policy'.⁹² At the same time, del Renzio claimed, they felt deterred from Marxist notions by John Berger's 'cloying sentimentality and clodhopper aesthetics'.⁹³ This last comment distances the IG from the 'realist' art favoured by Berger and Hogarth on the Left. The negative qualities del Renzio observed in Berger would have been epitomised in the latter's enthusiasm for the 'Kitchen Sink' realism of the early fifties.

The 'vague leftish sympathy' he spoke of shared little in common with the 'Left' represented by Paul Hogarth. Indeed Hogarth demonstrated in his essay already referred to, that many on the Left were openly hostile to the political and cultural infiltration they perceived to come from America. Abstract art practice was, in

Hogarth's view, simply sustained by American patronage:

If we are simple enough to suppose that our leading abstract artists are among the greatest who have lived, we would certainly be closing our eyes to the penetration into our cultural life which has become a basic characteristic of American imperialism throughout the capitalist world.⁹⁴

Ideologically, then, the British artists who were gathered together around the IG or who were placed within that abstract art practice identified by Alloway, were positioned somewhere between the liberal establishment on one side, and the left-wing 'realists' on the other - both of whom demonstrated forms of artistic conservatism.

With regard to 'America' it was members of the IG who manifested the most obvious interest, although some abstract artists were, by the mid-fifties, clearly engaged with American ideas.⁹⁵ Alloway described the prevailing mood in British culture at the time as embodying an 'aesthetic of scarcity', in contradistinction to the IG's own 'aesthetics of plenty'.⁹⁶ The IG found its stimulation and visual form through: '...an endless supply of imagery (supplied by mass culture) and an omnivorous all-overism (for that imagery's development)'.⁹⁷ Paolozzi, who had been producing collages since c1946, using American magazines as source material, exemplifies well this development in the early fifties.

Although there was an eagerness by the IG to engage with 'America' as a source of imagery necessary to sustain this 'aesthetic of plenty', their relationship with American art was a more complex one. Greenberg's view of mass-culture, for example, was one of fierce opposition. For him, 'mass culture' was 'kitsch', the latter defined as: '...all that is spurious in the life of our times'.⁹⁸ The role of advanced art, he asserted, was to uphold the 'living culture' which was being eroded in late capitalist society. The ruling class needed, for their own survival, to appease 'the people' with: 'popular, commercial art and literature with their chromotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.'⁹⁹

Greenberg's view that advanced art served to vitalize 'high' culture in the face of a debased 'mass' culture has some affinity with those in Britain, already identified, who held a liberal view of the relationship between culture and society. Yet Alloway saw in Greenberg a certain degree of kinship because the latter defended the autonomy of art practice and challenged the claim that art could express metaphysical 'absolutes'; a critical position Alloway rarely found in Britain at that time. But, to finish the sentence of Alloway's cited earlier where he praised Greenberg, he went on to conclude that the American was '... fatally prejudiced when he leaves modern fine art'.¹⁰⁰ Alloway's essay from 1958 can be read as a challenge to Greenberg's aesthetic:

Sensitiveness to the variables of our life and economy enable the mass arts to accompany the changes in our life far more closely than the fine arts ... Popular art as a whole, offers imagery and plots to control the changes in the world; everything in our culture that changes is the material of the popular arts ... What worries intellectuals is the fact that the mass arts spread; they encroach on the high ground ... Therefore, it is no longer sufficient to define culture solely as something that a minority guards for the few and the future (though such art is uniquely valuable and as precious as ever).¹⁰¹

Alloway sees in the products of 'mass' culture the resources to best express the experience of modern life; it is the democratic possibilities of such a culture which, Alloway claims, are feared by the guardians of 'high' art. But it is significant that Alloway finishes by acknowledging the value of 'high art' - a statement that is consistent with his support of abstraction. What he proposes is an 'expanded framework' where the distinction between 'high' and 'mass' art is reconsidered.¹⁰²

The discussion above clearly indicates that there were artists and critics working in Britain during the early fifties who adopted an oppositional stance which was disruptive of, and resistant to, the prevailing conservative art practices which they felt existed around them. This opposition was not united around any coherent set of ideas, although it has been observed that a core of ideals and values emerged which set the trajectory for a range of practices. This included the belief that the

criteria for assessing aesthetic value and the value of both 'high' and 'mass' art needed revising; that it was important to restate the terms of the 'autonomy' of art practice, in the sense that art should be, first and foremost, concerned with developing its own unique resources rather than claiming to express metaphysical 'truth'; and lastly, despite the reservations expressed by some artists, a dialogue with 'America' was seen as a fruitful resource for artists who wanted to restore some sense of internationalism, and express something of the experience of modern life.

In this study of the fifties, the Festival of Britain has provided a vivid demonstration of the tensions and conflicts that existed between those who ranged across the political spectrum. At stake, it seemed, was the leadership of culture. At one level there was a national contest over who were Britain's 'natural' leaders - the Right or the Left - and over how 'Britishness' was to be constructed. At another level it was the leadership of Britain in an international context that was being asserted, with America perceived as the obvious rival. Art had a function within the Festival, yet it was in no simple sense a medium of crude propaganda. It has been observed how, in a more persuasive and pervasive fashion, art was marshalled to articulate and uphold sets of values and ideals focussed on national identity. The liberal champions of modern art referred to throughout this period - men such as Herbert Read, Misha Black, Gerald Barry and John Maynard Keynes held positions of authority in a culture that was *managing* modern art and effectively domesticating it.

It was the belief of Alloway, and those other writers and artists referred to, that if modern art practice was to remain relevant and meaningful in its relationship to the modern world it had to keep ahead of the deadening effects of such ideological incorporation. They believed the post-war period had been a time when much modern art in Britain had failed to resonate with modern experience, and had demonstrated its inability to disturb the complacency of the 'establishment'. The course they proposed for the modern British artist was one which actively avoided the parochial self-interest associated with 'Britishness' in favour of an attitude of outward-looking 'internationalism'. No single, exemplary modern art practice was prescribed, although over the next decade or so there were important developments in 'pop art' and abstract art. One of the characteristics of modern British artists who consciously distanced themselves

from the conservatism associated with 'Britishness' was to look ever more eagerly to 'America'.

REFERENCES:

- 1 The *Times* included an article on 17 November, 1951, p7 which continued the controversy first provoked by the Festival concerning the status of the Arts Council.
- 2 There were five prize-winners. In addition to Gear these were: *Interior Near Paddington*, Lucian Freud; *Aquarian Nativity - Child of this Age*, Ivon Hitchens; *Bicyclists Against a Blue Background*, Robert Medley; and *Miss Lynn*, Claude Rogers.
- 3 Letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 23 April, 1951, p4.
- 4 Letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 1 May, 1951, p4.
- 5 Ben Nicholson, 'Defending Modern Artists', *Daily Mail*, 7 August, 1951, reprinted as Appendix 4 in the exhibition catalogue *25 for '51 - Paintings from the Festival for Britain*, Sheffield City Art Galleries, 1978.
- 6 30 April, 1951, p4.
- 7 Letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 21 April, 1951, p4.
- 8 Letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 28 April, 1951, p4.
- 9 See Chapter 6.
- 10 Both comments were from the *Daily Telegraph*, the first on 2 May 1951, p2; and the second on 26 July, 1951, p5.
- 11 Philip James, 'Patronage for Painters - 60 Paintings for '51', *The Studio*, volume 142, (1951), p47.

- 12 From the transcript of a conversation with the author, 24
November, 1990. See Appendix 4, p315.
- 13 Reported in the *Times*, 4 May, 1951, p4. Gaitskell's written
reply is also quoted: 'I am assured that, taken together, these
pictures are widely representative in style and cover various
aspects of contemporary British painting'.
- 14 *Daily Telegraph*, 27 April, 1951, p4.
- 15 *The Times*, 3 May, 1951, p3.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 'Art without Faith', *The Studio*, volume 142, number 701 (August
1951), p33. The editorial refers to the article by Philip James,
'Patronage for Painters - 60 Painters for '51', reproduced in the
same issue. This effectively 'frames' the article for the reader.
(For a discussion of this strategy, see Appendix 1, *The Studio*.)
Readers letters all agreeing with the editorial attack on 'modern
art' were published afterwards, *ibid.*, p158.
- 19 See Chapter 2.
- 20 *Daily Telegraph*, 26 April, 1951, p4.
- 21 From August-November, 1951.
- 22 The presidents were: R.J. Burn, NEAC; Russell Flint, Royal
Society of Painters in Watercolours; Hesketh Hubbard, Royal
Society of British Artists; Augustus John, Society of Mural
Painters and the Royal Society of Portrait Painters; William C.H.
King, Royal Society of British Sculptors; Laura Knight, Society of

Women Artists; Gerald Moira, Royal Institute of Oil Painters; Malcolm Osborne, Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers; and Norman Wilkinson, Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours.

- 23 Their first letter appeared in *The Times*, 9 August, 1951, p5.
- 24 *The Times*, 11 August, 1951, p5. Apart from 'six gallery directors, two art critics, two collectors, a dealer, and an industrial designer', Pooley listed the five serving artists: William Coldstream, Lynton Lamb, Henry Moore, Rodrigo Moynihan (ARA), and Carel Weight.
- 25 *The Times*, 13 August, 1951, p5.
- 26 *The Times*, 17 August, 1951, p5.
- 27 *The Times*, 24 August, 1951, p5. Russell Flint is here quoting the President's letter.
- 28 *The Times*, 6 September, 1951, p5.
- 29 See reference 19.
- 30 This was quoted in Ernest Pooley's reply to the critics. See reference 24.
- 31 Transcript of conversation with the artist, op cit., p312.
- 32 *The Times*, 11 September, 1951, p5. The other artists from the group who signed the letter were: Leonard J. Fuller, Marion Grace Hocken, Bernard Leach, Denis Mitchell and Marjorie Mostyn.
- 33 Letter to *The Times*, 24 August, 1951, p5.

- 34 Paul Hogarth. 'Humanism versus Despair in British Art Today', *Marxism Quarterly*, volume 2, number 1, (January, 1955), pp37-47, p37.
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- 53 *Ibid.*, p371. According to the editor, this reply appeared in *The Times*, 11 July, 1945.
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- 55 *Ibid.*, p17.
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- the essay, 'The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty', pp49-53, p50, written for the same catalogue.
- 58 Alloway, *ibid.*, p51.
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- 60 Lawrence Alloway, 'Retrospective Statement', from the catalogue to the exhibition, *The Independent Group...*, *op cit.*, p187.
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- 62 The exhibition ran from 4 July - 31 August, 1951.
- 63 Detailed in the exhibition catalogue , *The Independent Group...*, *op cit.*, p16.
- 64 The committee consisted of: J.R.M. Brumwell (Chairman), Ronald Avery, Dr. Jacob Bronowski, Dr Alex Comfort, E.C. Gregory, Richard Hamilton, Dr. Joseph Needham, Roland Penrose, Ewan Phillips, Herbert Read, Prof. C. H. Waddington and Lancelot Whyte. The exhibition design was by Avery and Hamilton.
- 65 For a discussion of *Unit One* see Chapter 3, particularly p27ff.
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- 73 Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists - their work and theory*, (London, 1954).
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- 81 Ibid., p10.
- 82 Ibid., p5.
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- 84 Ibid., pp2-3.
- 85 Alloway writes: 'Hilton ... says that "in the last resort a painter is a seeker after truth". But he also believes "he is like a man swinging out into the void". The latter sentence implies existential man making himself in the present by his actions, whereas the former sentence suggests an antiquated pilgrim'. Ibid., pp4-5.
- 86 Ibid., p5.
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- 88 The 'loyal men' are Sutherland, Nash and Piper; the 'dreamy boys', Vaughan, Craxton and Minton, *ibid.*, p2.
- 89 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch'. First published in *Partisan Review*, 1939. Reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990 - an anthology of changing ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford, 1992), pp529-541, p531-532.
- 90 Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', *Art in Theory...*, *op cit.*, pp554-560, p558.
- 91 Lawrence Alloway, 'The Arts and the Mass Media'. First published in *Architectural Review*, 1958. Reprinted in *Art in Theory...*, *op cit.*, pp700-703, p701.
- 92 Toni del Renzio, 'Pioneers and Trendies', from the exhibition catalogue, *The Independent Group...*, *op cit.*, p179. This first

appeared in *Art and Artists*, February 1984.

- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Paul Hogarth, 'Humanism versus Despair in British Art Today',
op cit., p39-40.
- 95 For example, Roger Hilton exchanged letters with Clement
Greenberg in 1955; Alan Davie visited America in 1956 and met
leading Abstract Expressionists; and Peter Lanyon had a one-
man show in New York in 1957.
- 96 Lawrence Alloway, 'The Independent Group: Postwar Britain
and the Aesthetics of Plenty', from the exhibition catalogue, *The
Independent Group...*, op cit., pp49-53, p50.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', op cit., p534.
- 99 Ibid., p533.
- 100 Lawrence Alloway, 'The Arts and the Mass Media', op cit., p701.
- 101 Ibid., p701-702.
- 102 Ibid., p703.

Moving towards the eighties: what was left of Modernism?

The fifties and sixties in Britain were a time when the benefits of technology were beginning to be felt by an increasing number of people and the utopia of an affluent society seemed within reach. As discussed in the previous section it was also a time when, despite resistance and ambivalence, there was evidence of a growing consumer culture, generated to a large extent by American economic expansion. Two often quoted phrases still capture the rhetoric of 'progress' in Britain at the time: the first was Harold Macmillan's 1957 claim to the British public that in terms of standards of living: 'You've never had it so good'; and the second was Harold Wilson's 1964 affirmation of 'the white heat of technological revolution'. In contrast, the period of the seventies and eighties in Britain, as well as in many other Western countries, was a time of crisis. The wave of Right-wing populism in the eighties which was intended to resolve the structural problems growing throughout the seventies, can retrospectively be judged to have been unsuccessful. Eric Hobsbawm's verdict on the period was that:

The history of the twenty years after 1973 is that of a world which lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis. And yet, until the 1980s it was not clear how irretrievably the foundations of the Golden Age had crumbled.¹

One reaction to this state of instability and crisis in Britain during the eighties was an effort from some in positions of political and cultural authority to galvanise public support around the notion of 'national identity' as a prerequisite for economic and social recovery. This often took on a tone of stridency and urgency rarely noted since the immediate post-war period. Before the eighties are studied in detail, and in order to contextualize the period more clearly, it is necessary briefly to consider the late fifties through to the late seventies. Throughout this discussion some sense of the relationship between three key elements will be traced: 1. changing economic, political and social conditions; 2. cultural and more broadly ideological evocations of 'Britishness'; and 3. practices and debates centred on modern art at the time.

One notable development of the thirties already discussed was the increased

range of commodities available in Britain. By the late fifties and early sixties London had become 'Swinging London', as shops took on a more lively appearance and sold a range of new products packaged by a new generation of artists and graphic designers. In 1959 the young painter Robyn Denny was commissioned to undertake a mural for Austin Reed, the men's outfitters. He recalled that, 'The company ... wanted to change their image ... they were going to try to address a younger customer ... They wanted a picture which would show a new London of fashionability...' ² Denny's painting consisted of words such as 'London', 'biggest', 'wide' and 'great' in a collage of typographical styles using primary colours. In 1963, the Beatles were photographed standing in front of the mural, in what now reads as a fitting emblem of a time when London was perceived as a vibrant cultural metropolis and a source of innovation. It is not surprising that many young artists, designers, architects, photographers (and the writer Lawrence Alloway) took residence in London, mostly around Ladbroke Grove and Holland Park. ³

There seemed to be a certain confidence among many artists at the time to challenge the 'establishment'. This is captured well in John Minton's row with students at the Royal College of Art in 1956, where he was a senior tutor. He was particularly enraged by an abstract painting by Denny, and described him as an 'Angry Young Man' and his work as meaningless: 'You could call it anything'. ⁴ In reply Robyn Denny and Dick Smith sent an open letter to Minton. They wrote:

We are not disillusioned with the world. There is not a God that failed us. To your generation the thirties meant the Spanish Civil War; to us it means Astaire and Rogers. For you 'today' suggests angry young men, rebels without causes; we believe in the dynamism of the times, where painting being inseparable from the whole is an exciting problem linked now more than ever with the whole world problem of communication and makes its essential contribution to the total which is knowledge. ⁵

This confidence and optimism also found expression in the *Situation* exhibition of 1960. ⁶ Here the work of eighteen abstract artists was shown, championed by Lawrence Alloway. ⁷ The catalogue essay was written by Roger Coleman, a

colleague of Alloway's at the ICA. Throughout the show there was an emphasis on 'largeness', with all but one painting being over thirty square feet. This emphasis on large-scale painting can be compared with work submitted for the *60 Paintings for '51* exhibition at the Festival of Britain when, it will be recalled, 'large' paintings were commissioned to encourage those new patrons who would hang work in public places.⁸ This altruistic motive was clearly not shared by *Situation* - the intentions were altogether less parochial and more exuberant. In Coleman's view it was a misconception that 'a large painting needs to hang in a large room'.⁹ The large painting, he believed, achieved three things: firstly, the spectator became 'contained and confined' by the sheer scale of the work; secondly, the canvas was seen as 'the record of a sequence of actions', and lacked detailed planning; and thirdly, paintings were sufficiently imposing to become objects 'in their own right'.¹⁰ Coleman acknowledged the debt these artists owed to post-war American art, but he did not see this as a constraint. He wrote:

...while some of the artists here are still in the process of assimilating what they have discovered through the Americans, the character of all the work is becoming recognisably individual. (Not recognisably 'British', however; the desire to be British by attempting to isolate British [sic] usually results, when it arises, in a full stop).¹¹

Here, Coleman identified what he felt to be two challenges facing the modern British artist. The first was the need to resist the conservatism that seemed to accompany a call for 'Britishness'; and the second was the need to turn to America, rather than Europe, for significant artistic developments. Alloway writing at the time supported both Coleman and *Situation* for the way they had met this challenge. He added gnomically that '(they) have escaped from Samuel Palmer on-the-rocks without becoming the 51st State'.¹²

This confident mood of the times which was reflected in a challenge to established institutions and traditions was partly due to major social changes. From the fifties onwards, for example, more attention was paid to 'youth', not least of all because the young had acquired a disposable income, generated by new jobs and higher wages. As a consequence they were seen as a potentially

lucrative market for the new leisure industries. It was also a time when there was a high demand for labour, and trade union power grew in strength. Both the 'young' and the 'working class' spoke with more confidence.

But to characterize the period as 'optimistic' requires some qualification. Many, for example, still remained ambivalent about the products of technology. Indeed some young artists also expressed a sense of gloom and frustration, and a strong commitment persisted among many of them to address social and political issues. The 'cold war' was large in the minds of many, and in response to growing concern the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) had been formed in 1958. Artists who celebrated certain aspects of American culture also expressed a fear for its destructive potential. Richard Hamilton made this point wittily when he attended the CND march to the Aldermaston armament works in 1959 accompanied by a life-size cardboard cut-out of Marilyn Monroe.¹³ Other artists saw the shadow of a nuclear holocaust overshadowing their work and providing a stimulus for action. The sculptor Barry Flanagan wrote to Anthony Caro in 1963:

Rejection has been a motivation for me. Is it that in these times positive human assertion directed in the channels that be, leads up to clouds, perhaps a mushroom cloud? Is it that the only useful thing that a sculptor can do being a three-dimensional thinker and therefore one hopes a responsible thinker, is to assert himself twice as hard in a negative way? Effort in this direction at this time is progress as it will encourage general re-direction.¹⁴

During the sixties there was growing evidence that some of the younger generation were being spurred on by their newly developed confidence. Rather than slipping into despair and passivity over social and political issues, they challenged what they perceived to be the cant of established cultural and political practices and institutions.

Although there is no simple correlation between the activities of the avant-garde and any single party-political allegiance, the oppositional character of the sixties and seventies owed a lot to the critical work begun by intellectuals on the Left in

the late fifties. E.P. Thompson, like many other Left-wing intellectuals in Britain during the fifties, observed the continuing signs of political conflict, both at home and abroad. Having become disillusioned with the communist party he realized that a new international socialist alignment was necessary. He later recalled this period:

My political consciousness cut its teeth on the causes of Spain and of Indian independence, chewed on a World War (in which I played a bit part), and has been offered an international diet ever since - Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, the Peace Movement and the Korean War, and thence to '1956', Suez, Cyprus, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Chile. '1956' was an international confrontation within the Communist movement, and the first New Left developed, for a brief moment an international presence.¹⁵

In 1960 the journal *New Left Review* was launched in Britain. It offered a re-appraisal of Marx in the light of contemporary developments in politics and culture. Thompson and Raymond Williams played an important role in its founding and Stuart Hall was appointed editor.

As Thompson has observed, the founding of a New Left in Britain was part of an international movement, with similar critical positions being taken up in America and other European countries. This movement had no real basis for long-term cohesive political action, and indeed by the late sixties had fragmented considerably. Yet, one of its principal unifying characteristics was a re-examination of, and challenge to orthodox power-structures in politics and culture. The civil-rights movement and radical feminism were just two of its products. For many, the student rebellions of the late sixties - in Europe and America - were something of a watershed. The French critic, Jean Clay, writing in 1970, captured something of the adversarial spirit felt by artists at the time:

It is clear that we are witnessing the death throes of the cultural system maintained by the bourgeoisie in its galleries and its museums. The values and the commodities which constituted it have now passed into the realm of the inessential.¹⁶

It was observed in the earlier chapters of this study that the modern movement had only achieved a somewhat precarious foothold in Britain before the war. In America during the post-war period, however, it had developed into a dominant formation. Yet as post-war British artists had drawn considerable strength from the example of transatlantic Modernism, by the mid 1960s in America itself, a challenge to orthodox Modernism had gained ground. This is exemplified by the dispute between the artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris, representing 'minimalist' art, and the modernist Michael Fried.¹⁷ Judd did not deny the importance of painting and sculpture but in the present situation, he said, there was a 'disinterest in doing it again'.¹⁸

The development of 'Conceptual' art in the late sixties testified to the continuing challenge to Modernist orthodoxy. While Judd and Morris had questioned the Modernist notion of the 'art object', the 'conceptual' artists now suggested that there need be no 'art object' at all. This particular development is especially relevant to this present study, because the advent of 'conceptual' art signalled the return of some avant-garde initiative to Europe. A British-based, American artist associated with conceptualism at the time was Michael Craig-Martin. He commented in retrospect that, 'Whereas I think of Minimalism as essentially a New York art, Conceptualism from the very beginning seemed international'.¹⁹ A focus for the international development of 'Conceptual' art was the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* held in 1969, firstly in Berne, Switzerland, then at the ICA, London, and subsequently at Krefeld, Germany.²⁰

It is not intended that this present study should rehearse the detailed developments of 'Minimalism' or 'Conceptualism' or the defence of Modernism by those such as Fried. Rather, it is more important to register here something of the significance of the challenge being mounted against a certain reading of Modernism at the time. Victor Burgin, a contributor to *When Attitudes Become Form*, wrote, with hindsight: 'Late-modernism stood for order (Burgin's emphasis) ... everything in its proper place, doing its duty fulfilling its pre-ordained role in patriarchal culture'.²¹ This draws attention to the fact that the challenge to artistic late-Modernism formed only part of a more general challenge against existing political and social structures and beliefs.

The artistic developments which have been reviewed above demonstrate that

throughout the period under discussion the limitations of late- or Greenbergian Modernism were becoming more evident. Alloway had maintained a conviction that the lessons of American abstract art, provided the means for resisting parochialism and maintaining an international spirit in Britain, but even he had sensed the limitations of Greenbergian Modernism. From the standpoint of Minimalism and Conceptualism in the late sixties and early seventies, it seemed that the 'traditional' media of painting and sculpture lacked the power to undertake critical work. Late-modernism itself may have become moribund, but the original impulse of modernism, its critical function, remained alive.

As suggested above, the critical attitude towards artistic late-modernism was part of a broader critical attitude taken up towards other developments in society. Hobsbawm was quoted at the start of this chapter as seeing the twenty years after 1973 as a time when the world 'lost its bearings'. 1973 was marked by the quadrupling of oil prices by OPEC and the start of a world recession. Andrew Gamble put the following gloss on the time: 'A major world recession erupted in 1974-5. It marked the decisive end of the longest and most rapid period of continuous expansion world capitalism has ever enjoyed'.²² While the oil crisis was perhaps a symptom of crisis rather than the cause, the year 1973 served to focus for many the growing perception that the West was slipping into economic stagnation, if not decline. The 'progress' promised by science and technology seemed tarnished, and those who were looking for evidence of 'failure' drew attention to the activities of the superpowers as they became locked in an ideological and technological contest over nuclear superiority. This contest repeatedly erupted in more or less localized wars around the periphery of the world system they dominated.

The period between the late-fifties and mid-seventies emerges from the above discussion as a time which can be reasonably described as a 'crisis of modernity'. The American critic Hal Foster, although remaining sceptical of the term 'postmodernism' suggests that it has some meaning if it used to describe two critical responses to this 'crisis'. One he calls a 'postmodernism of reaction', and the other a 'postmodernism of resistance'.²³ A brief review of Foster's distinction will be useful at this point for drawing out the theoretical differences in the 'postmodern' debate before mapping them out against the situation in Britain during the eighties.

Foster describes a 'postmodernism of reaction' as a 'repudiation of modernism'.²⁴ This critical position is exemplified well by the conservative American sociologist Daniel Bell, who described what he saw as a 'loss of coherence' in society.²⁵ In his view the modernist obsession with change and novelty had created chaos but now it had finally run aground. He described a new era:

We stand, I believe with a clearing ahead of us. The exhaustion of Modernism, the aridity of Communist life, the tedium of the unrestrained self, and the meaningless of the monolithic political chants, all indicate that a long era is coming to a slow close. The impulse of Modernism was to leap beyond: beyond nature, beyond culture, beyond tragedy - to explore the ... boundless , driven by the self-infinetizing spirit of the radical self.

... We are groping for a new vocabulary whose keyword seems to be limits: a limit to growth, a limit to the spoliation of the environment, a limit to arms, a limit to the tampering with biological nature...²⁶

The significant point is that for Bell, writing in 1978, it was the *spirit* of modernism that was to blame for the 'dissolution of a shared moral order' - for the ills of society in general.²⁷ Bell's standpoint turns on its head much of what the artists of the sixties and seventies believed they were doing. They saw themselves as addressing political and social issues, indeed just that range of issues that concerned Bell, but in order to challenge modernist orthodoxy and to keep a critical spirit alive. Yet Bell believed them to be simply satisfying the modernist impulse to be contrary and destructive.

Bell's observations and concerns were shared by many other cultural observers during the late seventies and eighties, yet they reached different conclusions. Two other voices in the so-called postmodernism debate can be identified here - one is the German cultural critic Jürgen Habermas, and the other the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. In their differing ways they can be seen to represent Foster's other critical response to modernism - a 'postmodernism of

resistance':

A postmodernism of resistance, then, arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the 'false normativity' of a reactionary postmodernism ... In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations.²⁸

Habermas takes issue with critics such as Bell, whose conclusions he considers anti-modern. He writes: 'Neoconservatism shifts onto cultural modernism the uncomfortable burdens of a more or less successful capitalist modernization of the economy and society'.²⁹ When modernism is cited as the *cause* of social decline, Habermas says, it betrays a failure to expose the real social causes of changing attitudes. In his view 'the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled'.³⁰ For him this project dated back to the Enlightenment and looked to a time when 'the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings'.³¹

Lyotard disagreed with Habermas' final analysis. The search to regain some 'unity of experience' was to him pointless: such unity was not to be found. For Lyotard one of the characteristics of the late twentieth century was the growing awareness that there were no certainties; that 'wholeness' was unachievable. The function of art now was to make a presentation of the unattainable: '...it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented'.³² Postmodernism was not, in Lyotard's view, a rejection of the modernist spirit but its continuation: 'A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant'.³³

The arguments between Habermas and Lyotard over the function of art leave them with considerable differences; yet they agree that the modernist spirit is not at an end. For both men this spirit is to be found in those critical art practices which try to resist what is conservative and reactionary. Those artists and writers identified so far who challenged high-modernism can thus find some justification for their work in the theoretical matrix exemplified by Habermas and Lyotard. In

contrast, however, they would find neo-conservative theorists such as Bell particularly hostile.

If attention is now turned to the situation found in Britain during the seventies and eighties, this country's specific cultural conditions can be placed in the context of the more general changes and attitudes discussed above. During this period there was growing unemployment in Britain and evidence of a faltering economy. The conditions were ripe for the widespread acceptance of political and cultural programmes that proposed radical change. In Britain this new political force was provided by the Conservative party under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. When the Conservatives were elected in 1979 it had become clear that Britain was failing economically: one measure of this was that since 1950 Britain's export of manufactured goods had steadily decreased while that of France, Germany and Japan had increased.³⁴ Moreover, unemployment had risen from below 500,000 before 1966 to around 3 million in 1983.³⁵ When Thatcher became Prime Minister it was not in any simple sense the moment when all thinking over economic, social and cultural matters suddenly changed course.³⁶ The significance of 1979 lies in the way that the newly elected government pursued, and legitimated for others, an agenda which held as one of its central aims the reversal of the alleged decline in all spheres of British life in the previous twenty five years. It was an historical conjuncture which found its most coherent form in what came to be known as 'Thatcherism'.

'Thatcherism' represented a distinct challenge to certain key definitions of 'the modern' which identified it with increasing bureaucracy and corporatism. In its place a programme for 'modernization' was proposed which looked back to nineteenth century Britain for models of individual enterprise and national prosperity.³⁷ Central to this programme was a call to reassert 'Britishness'. Shortly after the general election victory in 1979, Thatcher made a speech in which this note was struck:

the mission of this government is much more than the promotion of economic progress. It is to renew the spirit and solidarity of the nation. To ensure that these assertions lead to action, we need to inspire a new national mood, as much as to carry through legislation.³⁸

There is evidence from those involved in government policy-making during the eighties that 'Thatcherism' was conceived as a broad-ranging critique addressing all aspects of cultural, social and political life. The testimony of David Willetts, Director of Studies at the Centre for Policy Studies at the time, makes this point.³⁹ For him the decline of British society was largely the fault of the intellectual and cultural milieu of Bloomsbury and Fabianism.⁴⁰ Together, along with 'the change in the industrial structure and the rise of organized labour', they represented an 'assault on the Conservative position' through the advocacy of a spurious collectivism and egalitarianism manifested by 'the state'.⁴¹ In contrast, Willetts claimed that the Conservatives stood for the 'British' alternative: 'a host of individuals and associations, each pursuing our own purposes and goals but held together by a common culture and common traditions'.⁴² Willetts' analysis of the 'decline' of British society chimes with the neo-conservative theory of Daniel Bell considered earlier. Willetts, like Bell, regarded 'cultural modernism' as the fundamental cause of broader social decline - it is seen to encourage an attitude of irresponsible defiance towards social mores and a lack of respect for authority.

The ascendancy of the Conservatives in the eighties, then, amounted to an assault on the values and ideals of liberals and socialists. The earlier study of the Festival of Britain demonstrated how an ideological contest was articulated around the key concept of 'Britishness'. Stuart Hall surveying the eighties, observes a similar pattern:

We have seen over the last decade ... an intense and prolonged contestation within the same ideological terrain over some of the leading ideas which shape practical consciousness and influence our political practice and allegiances - those of 'freedom', 'choice', 'the people', 'the public good'; and what constitutes, and who can and cannot claim 'Englishness'.⁴³

Voices arose from cultural commentators on the Left in defence of liberal values, but their tone was frequently anxious and pessimistic. A typical form of concern was expressed in a series of articles published under the title 'Modernism and Post-Modernism' in *The Guardian* during 1986.⁴⁴ For three consecutive days the newspaper carried an enquiry into six of the arts, using a full page for each.⁴⁵ In

the introductory article, 'The crisis of contemporary culture' it was acknowledged that some analysis and defence of 'culture' in the broadest sense was required: '...it may be that by investigating the malaise at the heart of contemporary culture on a broad front we may also be able usefully to illuminate politics as well as aesthetics'.⁴⁶

A less polite and more aggressive response to cultural and social 'crisis', ostensibly from the political centre Left, came from the writer and art critic Peter Fuller. In some respects his opinion of the Right was conventionally liberal - on government policies concerning the arts, for example, he found them 'incurably philistine'.⁴⁷ Yet he also directed his criticism against the Left. When Fuller's fine-art journal *Modern Painters*, was launched in 1988, it provided him with a regular platform to develop his ideas. From this platform he challenged what were perceived as the many 'excesses' of modernism, and the harm caused by state interference in the arts; and he called for a reassertion of what was most 'British' in art. Fuller's exhortation stands in sharp contrast to the position taken up by British artists in the late-fifties and sixties who were discussed at the start of this chapter. During that earlier period these 'modern' artists believed that an emphasis on 'Britishness' would inevitably lead to less interesting, parochial art. What was required, they asserted, was an 'international' outlook which would encourage the necessary cross-fertilization of ideas, and an open attitude to change.

Fuller's ascendancy marked a call for 'Britishness' which had not been articulated so vehemently since the early fifties. The re-emergence of Fuller's claim for 'national identity' grew in the changed conditions of 'postmodernism' and 'Thatcherism' which have been discussed in this chapter. Fuller's project was an interesting one, because, by making 'Britishness' his chosen platform he aligned himself to a considerable degree with the ideological programme of the neo-conservatives. Indeed he saw *Modern Painters* as attracting writers from widely different political positions: 'there are thinkers on the left, like Richard Wollheim, and thinkers on the right, like Roger Scruton, who have made invaluable contributions to the understanding of art and aesthetic experience'.⁴⁸

Modern Painters is a noteworthy product of the eighties because it spotlights three issues: 1. it provides evidence of the terms in which the values and ideals

embodied in British art were re-appraised at a time when British society, in general, appeared to be going through a period of crisis; 2. it provides a focus for conflict between 'the modern' and 'Britishness'; and 3. in its claim to represent a 'plurality' of opinions, *Modern Painters* can be seen as a manifestation of a disposition identified as postmodern. These issues will be addressed in the following two chapters.

It has become clear from the foregoing discussion that the prevailing social climate in Britain during the eighties did not prove favourable for those artists determined to resist the call for 'British' art or a return to 'tradition'. If it is taken as axiomatic that a critical art practice will need to have a resistance to cultural nationalism and traditionalism among its qualifying characteristics, a question that will need to be traced through these final chapters is, how could such a critical art practice be sustained in the eighties and what form could it take?

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- 2 Quoted in the exhibition catalogue, *The sixties art scene in London*, Barbican Centre, London, March-June, 1993, p47.
- 3 See *ibid.*, p47. Here a map of London is printed with the houses and studios marked off.
- 4 Minton's comments were recorded at the time by a student, see *ibid.*, p28.
- 5 Reprinted in *ibid.*, p28. Punctuation and grammar as found.
- 6 'Situation' was held at the R.B.A. galleries in September 1960. A selection of work from the same artists was shown as the *New London Situation* at the Marlborough New London Gallery the following year. In 1962 the Arts Council ran a selection of 'Situation' work as a touring show.

- 7 The artists involved were Gillian Ayres, Bernard Cohen, Harold Cohen, Peter Coviello, Robyn Denny, John Epstein, Peter Hobbs, Gordon House, John Hoyland, Gwyther Irwin, Robert Law, Henry Mundy, John Plumb, Richard Smith, Peter Stroud, William Turnbull, Marc Vaux and Brian Young. A single sculpture by Caro was shown in *New London Situation*.
- 8 This was discussed in Chapter 8, p132-134.
- 9 Quoted in the exhibition catalogue, *The sixties art scene in London*, op cit., p90.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Lawrence Alloway, 'Size Wise', first appeared in *Art News and Review*, September 1960. Reprinted in the exhibition catalogue, *The sixties art scene in London*, op cit., p91.
- 13 This is noted in the exhibition catalogue, *The sixties art scene in London*, op cit., p34.
- 14 Reprinted in the broadsheet of the exhibition, *1965 to 1972 - when attitudes became form*, held in 1984 at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, and then The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh.
- 15 E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other essays*, (London, 1978), piii.
- 16 Jean Clay's essay was first published in *Studio International*. It is quoted here from *Modernism in Dispute - Art since the Forties*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (London, 1993), p209.
- 17 Key essays by Judd, Morris and Fried are reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by

Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford, 1992), pp809-834.

- 18 Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', an essay first published in 1965. Reprinted in *ibid.*, p809.
- 19 Michael Craig-Martin, 'Reflections on the 1960s and early "70s"', *Art Monthly*, number 114, (March 1988), pp3-5, p4.
- 20 The exhibition was first shown at Kunsthalle, Berne, (March-April), and then at the I.C.A. (September-October). The work of sixty artists from America and Europe was shown. British contributions were from: Victor Burgin, Barry Flanagan, Bruce McLean and Richard Long.
- 21 Victor Burgin, 'The Absence of Presence'. Reprinted in his book *The End of Art Theory - criticism and Postmodernity*, (London, 1986), pp29-50, p47. This essay was written for the exhibition catalogue, *1965-1972 - when attitudes became form*, a review of the previous exhibition, held at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge University, 1984.
- 22 Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline*, (London, 1986), p6.
- 23 *Postmodern Culture*, edited and introduced by Hal Foster, (London, 1985). Foster describes these concepts in his introduction.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pxii.
- 25 Daniel Bell, 'Modernism and Capitalism', first published in 1978. Reprinted in *Art and Theory*, op cit., pp993-998, p995.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p998.
- 27 *Ibid.*

- 28 *Postmodern Culture*, op cit., pxii.
- 29 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project', first published in 1981. Reprinted in *Art in Theory*, op cit., pp1000-1008. p1002.
- 30 Ibid., p1007.
- 31 Ibid., p1004.
- 32 Jean François Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism', first published in 1983. Reprinted in *Art in Theory*, op cit., pp1008-1015, p1015.
- 33 Ibid., p1014.
- 34 These statistics are printed in full in Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline*, op cit., p17.
- 35 Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline*, op cit., p36.
- 36 See, for example, Andrew Gamble, *ibid.* He writes: 'One of the great advantages enjoyed by the new Government was that it could pursue its monetarist experiment in a political climate in which opinion had already shifted decisively towards monetarism as the necessary framework for controlling the impact of the recession. The Thatcher Government did not have to abandon the old Keynesian demand-management policies. That had already been done by Labour.', p193.
- 37 For discussion of this see, for example, Andrew Gamble, *ibid.*, pp126-153, where he deals with the tension between the ideals of the market order and social democracy; see also Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal, Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, (London, 1988), pp39-56 where he uses Gramsci's concepts of 'hegemony' and 'organic crisis' to discuss the ideological

shifts which have taken place during the eighties.

38 Quoted by Peter Riddell in the article, 'After the Funeral', *New Statesman & Society*, 13 October, 1989, pp14-15, p14.

39 Willetts was also a member of the Prime Minister's Downing Street Policy Unit, 1984-86. He was elected to Parliament as the Conservative M.P. for Havant in 1992, and since 1993 has been PPS to the Chairman of the Party.

40 David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (London, 1992). See Chapter 2, 'The Advance of Socialism: 1900-1950', pp18-31.

41 *Ibid.*, p19.

42 *Ibid.*, p31.

43 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal...*, op cit., p9. Hall's use of the term 'Englishness' instead of 'Britishness' is perhaps to signal several contentious issues of the eighties: firstly, the tendency to consider the English as more 'British' than the Scottish, Irish or Welsh; and secondly the difficulty for Asians and Afro-Caribbeans to be accepted as 'English'.

44 *The Guardian*, 1-3 December, 1986.

45 The six articles and authors were: - Derek Malcolm (cinema), Michael Billington (theatre), W.L.Webb (literature), Waldemar Januszczak (art), Hugh Hebert (television), Tom Sutcliffe (music), and Martin Pawley (architecture).

46 *The Guardian*, 1 December, p10.

47 *Modern Painters*, volume 2, number 1, (Spring 1989), editorial, p5.

48 *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 11

Peter Fuller and *Modern Painters* - redefining 'Britishness' for the eighties.

When the first issue of *Modern Painters* appeared in Spring 1988 it provided the forum for a debate about the state of 'British' art which had been developing for at least a decade. The title was adopted by the journal's editor, Peter Fuller, as a tribute to the Victorian writer and critic John Ruskin. Between 1843 and 1856 Ruskin had published five volumes under this title which, together, amounted to his most ambitious treatise on art. Fuller described the legacy of Ruskin's work as 'shining forth ... as an ... indictment of twentieth century monopoly capitalism and its sad apology for a living human culture'.¹ Fuller's journal can be seen as an effort to maintain what he saw as Ruskin's project.

Fuller had written articles for liberal publications, such as *The Guardian* and *New Society* during the late seventies. His first two books *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, and *Art and Psychoanalysis*, were published in 1980. In his own words, the first 'still tried to maintain a position compatible with "Marxism" - as I understood it', while the second addressed the 'imaginative activity of the individual human subject'.² 1980 also saw the publication of his *Seeing Berger - an evaluation*. In this last volume it is possible to witness Fuller's political and ideological shift away from the Left, and his move towards ideas shared by many on the Right. This book indicates some of the key themes that pre-occupied Fuller for the rest of his life, and frequently found later expression in the pages of *Modern Painters*.

Fuller said of Berger that 'more than any other man, he taught me how to write about art'.³ What he admired in Berger was the 'consistent testimony to ... the fact that great art, authentic and uncompromised art, can contribute to our vision of (the) future by increasing "our awareness of potential"'.⁴ Despite Fuller's empathy with these humanist aspirations for art, he considered Berger's book and television series *Ways of Seeing* to have encouraged a cynical attitude towards 'great' art.⁵

Berger's thesis had been a polemic on the subject of 'realism' in opposition to the type of art history epitomised by Sir Kenneth Clark's book and television series of 1969 - *Civilization*. Such art history, said Berger, was written in the

language of 'disinterested art appreciation' and made claims that art expressed an 'unchanging human condition'. He continued: '...the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes...' ⁶ Berger concluded that the burgeoning of mass produced images in the late twentieth century had meant that original oil paintings were robbed of their former meaning and had been replaced by a 'language of images'. What was now at stake, he wrote was: 'who uses that language and for what purpose ... the entire art of the past has now become a political issue'. ⁷ Central to Berger's argument was his assertion about the unique character of oil painting. As a medium, he claimed, it had the materiality of an object and affirmed the wealth and possessions of the powerful in capitalist societies: 'Oil painting did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects. Everything became exchangeable because everything became a commodity'. ⁸

Ways of Seeing was, for Berger, another opportunity to elaborate his thesis on 'realist' art. Such art, he anticipated, would raise social and political consciousness: '...we can only make sense of art if we judge it by the criterion of whether or not it helps men to claim their social rights'. ⁹ Fuller objected to *Ways of Seeing* on the grounds that it had produced a crude, reductive view of art, from which the value of painting was seen as ultimately determined by ideological interests alone. In this view he was not alone. ¹⁰ Furthermore, said Fuller, Berger was guilty of encouraging the destructive and threatening forces which faced civilized society, even if he did so unwittingly. In an article written eight years later he put this more bluntly, accusing Berger of having 'anticipated the anti-aesthetic policies of Margaret Thatcher's Governments'. ¹¹ The catastrophic result, Fuller believed, was the proliferation of a 'mega-visual' tradition of mass-produced culture that epitomised a society of debased values. In this view Fuller stood alongside those liberals, already discussed, who had warned of the dangers of 'mass-culture'. ¹² In the face of Berger's alleged effort to undermine the function of oil painting, Fuller vigorously defended the medium and accorded it a prominent role in the amelioration of society: 'The occlusion of painting and sculpture involves the eclipse of significant values. I am interested in conserving these traditional media and those values'. ¹³

Fuller talked of maintaining the 'traditional' activities of painting and sculpture

for the continued transmission of 'significant values', and he identified his own role as one which endeavoured to 'conserve' these activities against any developing art practice which might undermine them. This cluster of concerns were to dominate his later work, although when Fuller published *Seeing Berger* in 1980 he did not attempt to link these values to a specifically 'British' tradition; the forging of this was to become the hallmark of the journal *Modern Painters*. Evidence that Fuller's ideas were developing a nationalist inflection can be taken from the article 'Against Internationalism' which appeared eighteen months before the journal's publication. Here he expressed his belief that, 'the British tradition has something specific to contribute to the "post-modern" world'. Britain was 'naturally' suited to this task because: '...in Britain, cultural tradition, climate, and environment, alike, have conspired to emphasise the value of seeking an imaginative and spiritual reconciliation between man and nature'.¹⁴ Fuller invoked 'Britain' as a source of civilized values which had been maintained through a respect for 'tradition'. He also saw the artistic preoccupation with 'the landscape' as an expression of these values. Moreover, Britain was seen to show 'natural' leadership at a time of perceived crisis. Claims such as these have been met before in this study. They resonate with the 'neo-Romantic' shift in the mid- to late-thirties marked by later editions of *Axis* and by *The Painter's Object*.¹⁵ The belief that Britain's 'national identity' frequently found its fullest expression in neo-Romantic images of 'the landscape' was restated during the post-war period in Robin Ironside's *Painting since 1939*.¹⁶ Later, at the Festival of Britain, when the organizers sought to assert cultural leadership, again 'the landscape' served as a potent symbol of both 'tradition' and 'civilized values'.¹⁷

Fuller's use of the term 'post-modern' requires some clarification at this point. Generally, he uses it as a term of disparagement directed at 'Left-wing', 'modern' artists of the late sixties, seventies and eighties (such as Richard Hamilton and Victor Burgin).¹⁸ Alternatively, as in the quote above, he uses it to identify what is for him an historical 'moment' ripe for those in 'authority' to lead others out of the chaos generated by 'modernism'. Fuller takes this second usage of the term to represent the only genuine function of 'post-modernism'. In this sense Fuller's cultural conservatism, and his conviction that cultural modernism was to blame for many of the ills of modern capitalist societies, are not unlike those views expressed by Daniel Bell.

If the first issue of *Modern Painters* is taken as exemplary it is apparent that 'authority' is demonstrated from a variety of political positions - as mentioned before, this is an indication of Fuller's understanding of the new alliances that are possible in a 'post-modern' world. Contributors included Lord Gowrie, former Conservative Minister for the Arts, and Chairman of Sotheby's; art critics and historians ranging from the more liberal-minded - such as David Mellor and Richard Cork, to the anti-modernist Brian Sewell; and those drawn from other disciplines, such as the Right-wing philosopher Roger Scruton, the mathematician Professor Benoit. B. Mandelbrot and the writer and art dealer Howard Jacobson.

One notable contributor to this first issue was H.R.H. Prince Charles, writing on the travesty which is modern architecture.¹⁹ His inclusion draws attention to two things: firstly, the cultural and political climate in Britain during the eighties which enabled the Prince to be accorded some authority in speaking of the failings of modernism; and secondly, the reasons for his inclusion in *Modern Painters*. With regard to the first, the Prince had signalled his concern for the legacy of modernism in the television programme he wrote and narrated for the BBC in 1988 called *A Vision of Britain*. Although his ostensible subject was the de-humanising effect of modern architecture, he also commented more broadly on the erosion of spiritual values.²⁰ Prince Charles struck up an interesting position which found general approval across the political spectrum. Despite the obvious paradox he was viewed as an 'ordinary bloke' making a stand against 'extremism'.²¹ Some on the Left saw this endorsement of the Prince as evidence of something more far-reaching. Tom Nairn commented:

Beneath a perfectly sincere semblance of protest and opposition, Royalty's function here is to help settle things down again, and persuade the left that all modernism - from Tom Paine to Richard Rogers, as it were - remains a permanently false and un-British trail.²²

The Prince's intervention on issues of social and cultural renewal seemed to satisfy the need of some for 'authority' and 'leadership'. The second point referred to above, the reasons for the Prince's inclusion in the first issue of *Modern Painters*, can be seen as both fortuitous and indicative. It was fortuitous

for the Prince because he would have been keen to find suitable platforms for his views, but equally it provided Fuller with a conspicuous launch for his journal. It was indicative because the inclusion of the Prince in particular, and of 'authoritative voices' in general, advanced Fuller's programme for a broad and united front against 'modernism'.

Through *Modern Painters* Fuller tried to achieve a balance. On the one hand he offered an ostensibly broad approach to art by using a range of writers not all of whom were 'specialists', and he covered a broad sweep of the subjects: from abstract to figurative art, from practice to theory. Clearly, this approach was partly motivated by a belief that the values inherent in art were connected to a range of human activities, united by a broader social purpose. As Fuller stated at the end of his first editorial: '...we believe that the aesthetic dimensions of human life matter ... good art can minister to the human spirit even in these troubled times.'²³ But, more mundanely, Fuller's catholic approach to art was motivated by his ambition to generate and maintain a large readership. On the other hand, however, through *Modern Painters*, he maintained an integrity and singleness of purpose in attacking modernism and campaigning to reassert 'Britishness'. The way he pursued this balance can be seen by looking more carefully at the contents of the first issue.

A point at which to start might be to identify something which appeared anomalous in the first issue. This was the inclusion of an article by the former editor of *Artscribe*, Matthew Collings. Through Collings' editorship this journal had become one of the most outspoken advocates of modernism in Britain during the eighties - championing, especially, new American and German art. Also, as a 'glossy', it stood as the main market competitor to *Modern Painters*. In his first editorial for *Modern Painters*, Fuller denounced *Artscribe* as the embodiment of a degraded 'modern art' - emblematic of a self-appointed elite of contemporary artists, writers and curators who held 'the public' in contempt.²⁴

Collings had quarrelled with the new, American owners of *Artscribe* and he wrote the article for *Modern Painters* after resigning as editor. He detailed his continued commitment to *Artscribe* as a corrective to what he saw as the prevailing conservative attitude to art in Britain:

the idea ... was that it should be about what's happening in international art ... getting it away from this very insular and parochial scene and into something that was a bit more open minded, more intelligent, more fun.²⁵

There was, he believed, an essential incompatibility between the 'critical rigour' of the contributors he enlisted whose analyses of art were often within a marxist tradition, and the naive and limited outlook of the owners:

There was a strict law about "politics" - a beautiful art book shouldn't have any - but they weren't yet familiar enough with that weird, inbred, reviewers' discourse to recognize that it was largely left-wing.²⁶

Collings' article took on a particular significance by appearing in *Modern Painters*. Its inclusion supported Fuller's claim that the journal was representative of broad-ranging opinion, even those that were apparently subversive. However, Collings' article is 'framed' in *Modern Painters* in such a way as to justify Fuller's more partisan editorial position.²⁷

In his editorial Fuller had berated *Artscribe* in general terms for supporting the work of 'poseurs' such as Gilbert and George, and for looking to 'international' rather than 'British' art for evidence of developing trends. He had also accused Collings of inflating the circulation figures for *Artscribe*. The journal's financial support by the Arts Council also confirmed Fuller's contention that the 'State' was colluding with the 'International Art World Inc'. More specifically Fuller accused this 'group' of being philistine, careerist in intention, and appealing only to a minority of people. Unwittingly, Collings gave support to these accusations through his candour over the low circulation numbers of *Artscribe*, and the 'failure' of the new owners.²⁸

Collings had decided that the article should take the form of an interview with himself.²⁹ He had devised all the questions except the third one which asked about Fuller's 'traditional sensibility' and the 'betrayal' of this 'British' trait by *Artscribe*.³⁰ Writing for *Modern Painters* provided Collings with two opportunities: firstly, it provided him with a rare chance to publicly 'put the

record straight' about recent developments at *Artscribe*. And, secondly, it gave him a chance to be provocative and mischievous in the enemy camp. He wrote in his article: 'I don't know anyone who takes his [Fuller's] ideas seriously'; and of the readers of *Modern Painters*: 'They're not really thinking for themselves'.³¹

The success of Collings' ploy is debatable, and some felt that he had betrayed the artists and writers he supported.³² His presence in *Modern Painters*, for example, could be seen as Fuller's successful humiliation of a former adversary. Perhaps Collings underestimated the extent to which the dominant values and ideals of *Modern Painters* expressed by Fuller in his editorial, and subsequently echoed by other contributors, could ascribe 'meaning' to his article. His jibe at the readership of the journal, for example, may simply have confirmed to readers that the 'group' to which Collings belonged was indeed elitist and contemptuous of 'the public' as Fuller had suggested. Similarly, the crisis at *Artscribe* and Collings' personal plight, had been fortuitous in providing for Fuller 'evidence' that 'modern' and 'international' art were in disarray. Fuller used *Artscribe*, and the ideas and values expressed by Collings, to characterise in more general terms his belief in the debased and marginal nature of the 'Art World' in the eighties. Indeed he prefaced Collings' article with the gloss:

As an editor, Collings proved himself devoted to the pursuit of those things - represented by the Turner Prize, the Saatchi Collection, and Art and Language - which *Modern Painters* would like to see transformed or eradicated.

One thing that emerges from this discussion of *Artscribe* and *Modern Painters* is the confident way in which Fuller was able to 'frame' and contain oppositional 'voices' in his journal. It also demonstrates the failure of the artistic community supported by *Artscribe* to adequately contest their position in the late eighties. David Batchelor, a regular contributor to *Artscribe*, described the political and cultural climate of the time as hostile to artists and writers such as him, but he also viewed it as a time of missed opportunities:

...*Modern Painters* fitted the culture of Thatcherism like a glove. That had to be resisted, and for a while a few of us enjoyed this. I think things could have been different if *Artscribe* had taken the

bait. It could have brought in more interesting people from the Left to raise the level of debate about contemporary art ... although a lot of people from the Left write very badly about art.³³

Collings' article for *Modern Painters* can be viewed as one possible strategy for contesting the values upheld by the journal. Indeed the only real congruence between Collings' critical position and the overall tenor of the articles from many other contributors to *Modern Painters* was their sense of disaffection. While Collings' dissent had been narrowly aimed at the new owners of *Artscribe*, many of the other writers affirmed Fuller's pessimistic view of the 'Art World' and the present state of 'crisis'. Robert Hughes' article on Julian Schnabel, for example, used both the artist, and the American culture that had sustained him, as a symbol of the crisis of modernism: "'Modernism' was telescoped into 'newness' and newness was promoted as a value in itself. The art market embraced the aesthetics of Detroit, a new model with styling changes every year..."³⁴

Hughes' article was followed by Roger Scruton's attack on the 'tasteless banality' of Gilbert and George. 'The State' and private patrons were seen as equally culpable in promoting this work:

The new species of patron - the state cultural apparatus, represented by the Arts Council and its officials, and the fast-thinking, restless yuppies of the Saatchi school - is anxious to justify its financial power...³⁵

In an article that followed Collings' 'interview', Sir Roy Shaw concurred with Scruton's evaluation of Gilbert and George and castigated the Arts Council for its consistent 'failure of nerve' and 'reluctance to discriminate'.³⁶

It is apparent from the articles that, despite their mutual disaffection, there was a significant difference between Collings' position and the one held by many of the other writers. Although Collings was disappointed by the fate of *Artscribe* he remained resolute in support of the type of art and art criticism that he had been associated with while he was editor. Contrary to Fuller's assertion, though, *Artscribe* did not demonstrate a simple, uncritical acceptance of artists such as

Schnabel, yet still the journal was condemned by him as part of the discredited 'Art World'.³⁷ It was the recurring disaffection with, and trenchant opposition towards, this 'Art World' that united many of the other contributors to *Modern Painters*.

In general terms, Shaw bemoaned the current failure to identify 'quality' in art: a term used by Fuller in his editorial, while Scruton appealed to 'taste and aesthetic value' and the 'civilising function of art'.³⁸ Prince Charles invoked the need to 'reassert a sense of vision and civilized values' in the arts.³⁹ His speech, specifically about the 'tyranny' of modern architecture, argued that these values found their truest expression in the traditions of Britain. St. Paul's Cathedral was the perfect symbol of 'British' resistance to the vagaries of history and now stood at 'the very heart of our nation as the spiritual centre of the capital city'.⁴⁰ It was the explicit connection made by Prince Charles between the need to reaffirm 'civilized values' and its ultimate realisation through the restoration of a 'British' tradition that encapsulated clearly the primary theme of *Modern Painters*. Although such a clear call to reassert 'Britishness' is not made by Shaw, Hughes or Scruton, they all confirm the urgent need to reject 'American values'. Not for the first time in this study 'America' is summoned to characterise the antithesis of these 'civilized values'.⁴¹

After Fuller's editorial in *Modern Painters*, three articles follow in which the features of this 'British' tradition are identified through the work of four 'modern' British artists. They are Lucian Freud, David Bomberg, Graham Sutherland and Francis Bacon.⁴² Taken together the writers attribute to these artists those characteristics often invoked as innately 'British'. They exemplify, for example, individualism and dilettantism. Freud is described as a 'difficult man, who like Bacon, gambles', and shares with Bacon an association with 'Bohemian London'.⁴³ It is pointed out that Freud eschewed the dealer system for an 'agent', thus signifying his rejection of the 'professional' networks of distribution.⁴⁴ Bomberg, too, is cited as being sceptical of the 'professional': 'We should expect the untrained to be more successfully expressive than the conventionally trained...'⁴⁵ Bomberg is portrayed as an 'outsider' whose interests were eccentric to the trends of 'modern art', and Fuller similarly says of Bacon and Sutherland that: 'the work of both men is eccentric to modernist concerns'.⁴⁶ These three articles rehearse again that cluster of 'British' qualities that are claimed by its

adherents as unquestionably virtuous. Once more, the 'amateur' is a dominant characteristic of those artists who are not motivated by financial reward or ambition, but by an inner conviction to 'express' themselves. The tension therefore remains, as it did for Paul Nash in the thirties, between the demands of being both 'British' and 'modern'.⁴⁷

The difference claimed for these 'modern artists' advanced by Fuller, Oxlade, and Gowrie as distinct from the interests of 'modernist' art was the 'humanist' concerns of the former. The term 'humanist' was used by Gowrie both to assert what Freud's art stood for and against. Freud, writes Gowrie, 'gives us back an older, humanist not formalist, language for talking about art'. This is seen as antithetical to 'modernist' art, rooted in post-war abstraction. Such art chose 'to go ontological' and became marked by narcissism through a preoccupation with 'artistic interest' [Gowrie's emphasis].⁴⁸ In a similar way Oxlade wrote of the failure of much modern art: 'The basic flaw in modernism has been its conceptual bias, which, combined with a preoccupation with novelty, has led to reductionist absurdity'.⁴⁹ Bomberg's work is accorded a metaphysical weight, seen by Oxlade as expressed perfectly in the aspiration to seek 'spirit in the mass'. This 'metaphysical weight' is believed to be present in the work of artists who have found the means of expressing the profound relationship between the individual and the universal.⁵⁰

Fuller's article comparing the work of Graham Sutherland with Francis Bacon sought to identify more precisely the attributes of a 'British' tradition of painting and he quoted with approval Philip James' earlier evaluation of these artists as 'incontestably English in their style and vision'.⁵¹ Although Fuller believed both artists to be expressing the 'reality' of the 'human condition' he thought Bacon's painting a severely limited type of 'Realism'. It merely dealt with 'meaningless despair' and failed to offer any sense of final redemption, something evident in Sutherland's paintings, and also believed by Gowrie to be an attribute of Bomberg's work.⁵² It is Sutherland, therefore, who was seen to more adequately 'reveal the depths of the human spirit'.⁵³ He had been at his best, said Fuller, when he had not made 'too many concessions to accepted modernist styles', but affirmed instead his 'roots in the landscape and tradition of Britain'.⁵⁴ Through his 'imaginative, spiritual, and aesthetic response' he epitomised the best of landscape art: The 'English tradition of imaginative transformation of the

appearances of nature'.⁵⁵

Sutherland's turn of face, away from 'modernist styles' and towards his 'roots' signalled, for Fuller, the strengths and virtues of his art. Along with Freud and Bomberg, Sutherland was representative of a newly restored canon of great 'British' art. These artists had returned to the 'British' tradition of figurative and landscape painting and provided the ideal means of expressing the 'reality' of the 'human condition' in a form that was accessible to 'the people'. Above all it was the 'British' attributes of 'individualism', 'eccentricity' and 'dilettantism' which enabled these artists to resist the destructive effects of 'modernism' and 'internationalism'. Again, a tension exists between the demands of being 'British' and being 'modern'. It is revealing that what Fuller saw as Sutherland's strengths could also be seen as his weaknesses. Perhaps, for the modernist critic, Sutherland's turn of face, away from 'the modern' would serve to expose the weakness of an art grounded in conventional forms of illustration. It would also reveal *Modern Painters'* canon to be provincial and timid.

In so far as these three artists provided for Fuller apposite examples of a British 'canon' they represented the art of previous generations. The inclusion of an article in the first issue of *Modern Painters* about the younger artist, Therese Oulton, suggested to the reader that a 'British tradition' was being continued.⁵⁶ Cohen characterised the artist's ideas and work in terms that accommodate her securely within this 'tradition'.

He made the point, for example, that although Oulton expressed an interest in 'theory', it was her individual expression that remained of primary importance for her work. This separated her from other 'post-modern' contemporaries: 'While feminism and radical critique provide the theoretical basis for what she claims to do in her art, her paintings may nonetheless operate on quite a separate level ... she admits to "painting from necessity"'.⁵⁷ Her rigorous working process, likened by Cohen to alchemy, would provide 'a lesson which could well be learnt by conceptualists and formalists alike'.⁵⁸

Oulton's paintings are ostensibly 'abstract' but Cohen is anxious to distinguish her work from modernist abstraction. Her paintings, he says: 'resist being read in terms of formal abstraction and exude instead their rootedness in the real

world'.⁵⁹ 'Abstraction' is still used here to connote a form of art that is 'progressive' and 'difficult', and in Oulton's case it is seen as a legitimate style for expressing metaphysical 'truths'. Yet its radical or critical function is limited by its firm anchorage in 'Britishness'. Her work should be viewed, Cohen suggests, in the context of, 'an English tradition of landscape painting'.⁶⁰ Turner and Constable are seen as her predecessors and the article is illustrated with paintings by the nineteenth century 'Sublime' artists John Martin and James Ward.⁶¹

The foregoing discussion of the first issue of *Modern Painters* has provided some evidence that Fuller had constructed a forum for developing the critical concerns which had occupied him since the seventies. His project consisted of two strands; the first was a continuing critique of the perceived excesses of 'modernism' and 'post-modernism'; and the second was to urge for a 'return' to a 'national tradition'. The journal enabled Fuller to mobilise contributors whose articles confirmed the pessimism of the editorial position regarding the 'Art World'. Through the collective weight of individual articles these writers also helped to identify the traits and values of those artists considered to be pre-eminently 'British'.

Although there is a certain coherence and confidence in the claims made in *Modern Painters*, Collings' article serves as a reminder that Fuller's project was not without its tensions. Even though Collings' intervention may have been flawed or misjudged it offered at least the possibility of hindering the course of provincialism that was always likely to emerge from *Modern Painters*. It has already been seen that any other such efforts to hinder or challenge this course were rarely in evidence at the time. The strength of *Modern Painters*, it seems, was that it offered a combination of cultural pessimism and the assertion of national identity to a growing constituency of disaffected liberals and more traditional conservatives. In the cultural and political climate of Britain in the eighties Fuller's project was endorsed by this constituency as both legitimate and necessary. Moreover the critical ambit of the journal extended beyond a narrow discussion of 'Art' and sought more ambitiously to relate the values and ideals of 'British' art to other spheres of life. This has been seen from the discussions above, where celebrated artists were seen as those who successfully expressed 'civilised values' and illuminated the 'human condition'.

Other contributors to the journal considered this broad 'function' of art in the context of other disciplines or other other areas of social life. One example was the discussion of Benoit Mandelbrot's Fractal Geometry, in which the mathematician's theories were used to claim the existence of an underlying 'structure' common to both art and architecture, and to the 'natural' world.⁶² Claims of this sort were not new to discussions of modern art - they had underpinned the theory of the Purists in France during the twenties, for example. As already discussed, the purported connection between art and mathematics had also been made popular among several generations of modern artists in this country through the writing of D'Arcy Thompson.⁶³ Elsewhere in the journal a new book on education was reviewed.⁶⁴ This book, which contained a preface by Peter Fuller, restated many of the ideas expressed in *Modern Painters* concerning the deleterious effects of 'modernism' and the need to defend 'cultural conservatism', and subsequently proposed new strategies for the teaching of art in schools.

One of the central achievements of *Modern Painters* was that it articulated those issues and concerns which had resonance across a range of cultural practices. There were some from both the political Right and Left who ratified Fuller's call to conserve 'traditional values', and many liberals shared the anxiety that 'modernism' was a project that had become debased by the excesses of 'post-modernism'. Also of importance was the overall tone of 'authority' struck by the journal, aided by its expensive production. Fuller believed that *Modern Painters* should not be afraid to assert an authoritative voice. He deplored the passing of cultural leaders such as Kenneth Clark and in the first issue of the journal accorded authority to the opinions of those who held 'leadership' roles in public life: such as Prince Charles, Lord Gowrie and Sir Roy Shaw.⁶⁵ Fuller believed that artists, too, had a responsibility for showing aesthetic and cultural leadership: part of Sutherland's pre-eminence, he said, was his ability to embody in his work 'the selective affirmation of values'.⁶⁶ The breadth in the range of artists and writers who were conferred with 'authority' in *Modern Painters* precludes any crude conflation of 'authority' with the Right.

This discussion of the first issue of *Modern Painters* has revealed three distinctive features of the journal. One is the general claim endorsed by different writers that 'good' art should 'minister to the human spirit'.⁶⁷ The second is the way that

Modern Painters clearly flagged its intention to address specific social issues such as conservation, ecology, and education. These two features were, in practice, inter-related, both being represented in *Modern Painters* as areas of cultural and social life where it was imperative to reassert 'lost' or eroded values and ideals. In *Theoria*, a book published by Fuller in 1988, the year that his *Modern Painters* was launched, he quoted Ruskin with approval in what could stand as a fitting testimony for Fuller's own project: 'wherever Art has been used *also* to teach any truth, or supposed truth - religious, moral, or natural - there it has elevated the nation practising it, and itself with the nation.'⁶⁸

Ruskin's words also draw out the third distinctive feature of *Modern Painters* - that is, the importance of re-stating 'national identity'. The following chapter will enquire further into these characteristic features of *Modern Painters* and see to what extent the ideas and issues raised in its pages resonated with those expressed in the wider world outside of 'fine art'.

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- 1 Peter Fuller, *Theoria - Art and the Absence of Grace*, (London, 1988), p27.
- 2 Peter Fuller, from the introduction to *Images of God*, (London, 1985).
- 3 Peter Fuller, *Seeing Berger - A Revaluation*, (London, 1980), p1.
- 4 Ibid., p2.
- 5 John Berger presented the BBC television programme in 1972. The book of the same title was made by Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb and Richard Hollis, (Penguin, 1972).
- 6 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, *ibid.*, p11.
- 7 Ibid., p33. Berger acknowledges the influential ideas of German

critic Walter Benjamin.

- 8 Ibid., p87.
- 9 John Berger, *Permanent Red*, (London, 1979), p18. This is a collection of material written largely for the *New Statesman*, mostly written between 1954-1960.
- 10 See, for example, Art and Language, *Ways of Seeing*, volume 4, number 3, October 1978. Interestingly, Art and Language were also a favourite target of Fuller's vituperation. See Chapter 11, p199.
- 11 Peter Fuller, 'Overwhelming Treachery, and Such Like', *Art Monthly*, number 116, (May, 1988), pp10-12, p11.
- 12 See, for example, the discussion of Daniel Bell in Chapter 10, p183.
- 13 Peter Fuller, *Seeing Berger...*, op cit., p20.
- 14 *Art Monthly*, number 100, (October, 1986) pp12-14, p14.
- 15 These publications are discussed at length in Chapter 5.
- 16 See Chapter 6, especially p95, and pp99-100.
- 17 This is discussed fully in Chapters 8-9.
- 18 Fuller discusses this in 'Art and Politics', an interview with Colin Symes, *Art Monthly*, number 89, (September 1985), pp3-9.
- 19 'The City: "A Stunted Imitation of Manhattan"', *Modern Painters*, volume 1, number 1, (Spring 1988), pp29-33.
- 20 *A Vision of Britain*, was an Omnibus programme shown in 1988.

A book of the same name, written by the Prince, was published the following year.

- 21 A discussion of the contradictions of Prince Charles' position are raised in Ros Brunt's article: 'Charles as Everyman', *New Statesman and Society*, 11 November, 1988, pp7-8.
- 22 'Palace of Enchantments', *New Statesman and Society*, 11 November, 1988, pp 8-10. Nairn provides a more thorough critique of the British monarchy in his book *The Enchanted Glass*, published in 1988.
- 23 *Modern Painters*, op cit., p3.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 'Doing it by the Book', *Modern Painters*, volume I, number 1, (Spring 1988), pp59-63, p59.
- 26 Ibid., p63. Collings lists the following contributors to *Artscribe* as being particularly consistent with his editorial intentions: Art and Language, Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, David Batchelor, John Miller, Ronald Hones, Claudia Har, Pat McCoy and Christian Leigh.
- 27 For a similar account of the way a journal can 'frame' articles see the discussion of *The Studio*, Appendix 1.
- 28 'Doing it by the Book', op cit., pp59-60.
- 29 This was stated in correspondence with the author, 28 October, 1990, Appendix 5, pp324-325.
- 30 Ibid., pp324-325.
- 31 'Doing it by the Book', op cit., p59.

- 32 Collings wrote: 'I was always surprised when it was suggested that I "supported" *Modern Painters* by writing for it - I always thought my own line was crushingly obvious in the few "diary" columns I contributed, but perhaps I was being naive'. From correspondence with the author, op cit., pp325-326.
- 33 From the transcript of a conversation with the author, 11 December, 1994. See Appendix 6, p338.
- 34 'The Artist as Entrepreneur', *Modern Painters*, op cit, pp35-39, p36.
- 35 'Beastly Bad Taste', *ibid.*, pp40-42, p42.
- 36 'Art For Whom? - The Arts Council's mixed performance', *ibid.*, pp64-67.
- 37 See, for example, Charles Harrison's review of Schnabel's work in *Artscribe*, number 61, (January/February, 1987), pp59-60. This article discusses both the success and failure of the work.
- 38 Scruton, op cit., p42.
- 39 'The City: "A Stunted Imitation of Manhattan"?', op cit., p33.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p29.
- 41 The tension between 'America', 'civilized values' and 'Britishness' in the post-war period forms a persistent theme in the chapters of this study dealing with the 'fifties'.
- 42 Grey Gowrie, 'The Migration of Lucian Freud', pp5-11; Roy Oxlade, 'David Bomberg: Notre Dames of the Mind', pp12-19; Peter Fuller, 'Nature and Raw Flesh', pp21-27.

- 43 Grey Gowrie, *ibid.*, p5.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 Roy Oxlade, *op cit.*, p19.
- 46 Peter Fuller, 'Nature and Raw Flesh', *op cit.*, p21.
- 47 This is discussed in Chapter 3.
- 48 Grey Gowrie, *op cit.*, p5.
- 49 Oxlade, *op cit.*, p19.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 'Nature and Raw Flesh', *op cit.*, p24.
- 52 Fuller, *ibid.*, p27. For Gowrie's comment see his article, *op cit.*, p17.
- 53 Fuller, *ibid.*, p25.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p24.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p27.
- 56 David Cohen, 'The Jewels of Art History', *Modern Painters*, *op cit.*, pp43-47.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p43.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p44.
- 59 *Ibid.*

- 60 Ibid.
- 61 The illustrations used were: John Martin, *The Great Day of Wrath*, 1851; and James Ward, *Gordale Scar*, 1812.
- 62 'The Fractal Geometry of Nature', an interview with Mandelbrot by the TV producer, Mike Dibb, pp52-53. Dibb had also been involved in the production of *Ways of Seeing*.
- 63 In an essay of 1920 entitled 'Purism', Charles Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) and Amédée Ozenfant had written: '...a work of art should induce a sensation of a mathematical order, and the means of inducing this mathematical order should be sought among universal means'. An edited version of this is reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford, 1992), pp237-240, p238. D'Arcy Thompson's book *Growth and Form* is discussed in the context of the exhibition of the same name. See Chapter 9, pp158-159.
- 64 The book being reviewed was *Living Powers: The Arts in Education*, edited by Peter Abbs. The reviewer was Colin Painter, p96.
- 65 Fuller mentions Clark in his first editorial for *Modern Painters*, op cit., p3.
- 66 Peter Fuller, 'Sutherland and Bacon', op cit., p27.
- 67 This phrase is used by Fuller in his first editorial, op cit., p3.
- 68 *Theoria*, op cit., p48.

CHAPTER 12

***Modern Painters* - where was its constituency?**

At the close of the previous chapter, three distinctive features of *Modern Painters* were identified which, it was suggested, might usefully be considered in a wider social and cultural context. It is anticipated that through such an investigation a clearer understanding may be reached about the constituency which shared the values and ideals upheld by the journal.

The article on Mandelbrot's Fractal Geometry in the opening issue of *Modern Painters* illustrated Fuller's ongoing concern for the first distinctive feature: that art should 'minister to the human spirit'.¹ It established his conviction that good art always expresses profound, universal truths about the relationship of human existence to the rest of the natural world. In his book *Theoria* he described how an understanding of Mandelbrot could demonstrate that 'good art' and 'nature' shared some deeper transcendental unity: 'His [Mandelbrot's] geometry takes as its starting point one of the oldest poetical and philosophical intuitions, the principle of self-similarity, namely that each part of the world replicates the whole'.² From this premise Fuller went on to cite Mandelbrot's assertion that: 'The property of scaling that characterizes fractals is not only present in Nature, but in some of Man's most carefully crafted creations...But this property is absent in much of the architecture of the modern movement'.³ This conclusion enabled Fuller to justify his opinion that much modern art was innately 'unnatural' and inimical to spiritual well-being.⁴

Fuller was anxious to point out that his emphasis on 'spiritual' concerns did not embrace a belief in God. On the contrary it had been his earlier contention that the 'traditional' use of oil paint had to be fiercely defended because it was a medium with a unique ability to express man's spiritual rather than religious aspirations: 'Man had mingled his emotional and affective life in his religious projections: oil painting was part of the process of his return to himself, or his first finding of himself'.⁵ Throughout the first issue of *Modern Painters* Fuller consistently asserted this spiritual and redemptive role for art. It is evident, for example that these were the terms used to establish the eminence of particular artists.⁶

Fuller argued from a broadly secular humanist position. He believed that the quality of human life was under constant threat from the values and ideals of a debased society. Redemption was always possible, but was only achieved by faith in the human ability to find spiritual reconciliation through a deeper understanding of the natural world rather than through any belief in God. Art's role in this was seen as crucial: it is one of the ways that such universal, spiritual 'truths' can be expressed and communicated. Although Fuller's views were marked out from others by his particular emphasis on nationalism, conservation and 'traditional' methods and materials he articulated and condensed both the values and anxieties of a broader liberal constituency.

The book *Real Presences* by George Steiner produced in 1989, one year after Fuller's *Theoria*, provides some evidence of this.⁷ Its publication received media attention, with *The Times* dedicating a full page to an interview with Steiner, and the *Guardian* including both an article by Geoff Dyer and a book review by Peter Fuller.⁸ On the first page of Steiner's book he outlined his intention to argue that: 'the experience of aesthetic meaning in particular, that of literature, of the arts, of musical form, infers the necessary possibility of..."real presence"'.⁹ He defined this 'real presence' further by referring to the act of creative expression as a 'wager on transcendence' and to the ultimate 'enigma of creation'.¹⁰ Great art, he asserted, articulated a 'truth' that 'speaks for itself': 'No stupid literature, art or music lasts. Aesthetic creation is intelligent in the highest degree'.¹¹ This suggests that the production of art is analogous to the functioning of a living organism which 'naturally' sustains what is healthy and rejects what is foreign or damaging. The 'major artist' is represented as the exceptional individual who recognizes and expresses the 'truth': 'More than ordinary men or women, the significant painter, musician or poet relates the raw material, the anarchic prodigalities of consciousness and sub-consciousness to the latencies, often unperceived, untapped before him, of articulation'.¹²

For Steiner the act of 'creation' was itself a 'critical' process that required no further interpretation.¹³ His attack was aimed at those who offered 'secondary' criticism; whose existence he regarded as 'parasitic'.¹⁴ He identified this target more precisely as: '...the academic and that immensely influential, although complex form, the academic-journalistic. It is the universities, the research institutes, the academic presses, which are our Byzantium'.¹⁵ Nothing, in

Steiner's view, should be allowed to interfere with the 'direct encounter with the "real presence" provided by the work of art itself'.¹⁶

Although Steiner did not argue for a reassertion of 'national identity' his thesis strengthened and corroborated Fuller's position in other ways. Both men, for example, believed the 'great artist' to be the individual capable of 'directly' expressing spiritual and universal values and 'truths', and the sensitive observer to be engaged in a process of 'disinterested contemplation'. In *Theoria* Fuller attacked 'modernism' and upbraided Clive Bell and Roger Fry for their 'formalist' tendency and contempt for British Art. Yet both Steiner and Fuller concurred with Fry and Bell that the creation and reception of art involved some 'spiritual' experience.¹⁷ Steiner and Fuller thus exemplified an ambivalent attitude towards 'modernism': while sharing the 'modernist' insistence on the autonomy of aesthetic experience, they believed that there were imperatives inherent in 'modernism' which led ineluctably to the later, 'degenerate', developments which they were now witnessing. For Fuller this current degeneracy was best embodied in the term the 'Art World', as previously discussed.¹⁸ For Steiner it was the 'secondary critics' whose 'journalistic' mentality led only to work that was opportunistic, ephemeral and ultimately destructive.¹⁹ Fuller identified the source of the problem as the pernicious influence of foreign, particularly 'American' developments. Similarly, Steiner believed that it was the 'Americanization' of culture that had resulted in the loss of a sense of permanent 'values' and 'culture'.²⁰

Fuller felt that *Real Presences* confirmed his own critical position. In a review of the book he wrote: 'There is little in this argument from which I would dissent; indeed, I was drawn on through page after page by the excitement of hearing these things affirmed so robustly.'²¹ There is, then, some evidence that the ideas expounded in Fuller's *Modern Painters* and *Theoria* mesh with those in Steiner's *Real Presences*. There is a confident tone evident in both, and Fuller's enthusiastic affirmation of Steiner's work suggests that he sensed the existence of a broader constituency who shared the same values and ideals concerning the 'spiritual' function of art in society. It could be suggested that Fuller envisaged both his own role, and Steiner's, as ministering to the needs of this constituency.

There is further evidence that Fuller's critical position can be understood not

only in relation to his contemporaries but also through its resonance with the past. Fuller's interest in the perceived relationship between science, mathematics and art, for example, leads to some comparison with the ideas articulated around the exhibition *Growth and Form* held in 1951. Fuller cited Mandelbrot to assert that there were 'universal' laws uniting all forms of life which, through art, found expression and a means of communication. When the exhibition *Growth and Form* was discussed in an earlier chapter it was observed that the book of the same name by D'Arcy Thompson also made claims for some 'underlying' relationship between natural forms and the geometry of man-made structures.²²

However, Fuller believed that D'Arcy Thompson's book had been used by artists to justify an aesthetic he opposed: 'the idea came to persist among artists that a "scientific aesthetic" was neat, rectilinear and constructivist, i.e, essentially *modernist*'.²³ Originally published in 1916 the book *Growth and Form* had been popular since its reprinting in 1942, although it is more accurate to suggest that artists and critics had used it to justify or exemplify a *range* of 'meanings' or ideals that were not simply 'constructivist' and which were not always compatible with each other. It has been argued earlier, for example, that Reyner Banham, who was closely associated with the organizers of *Growth and Form*, believed that the exhibition had succeeded in challenging pre-conceived notions of 'high art' by provoking people into visualizing new ways of looking at the relationship between those structures found in Science and Technology and those made in art and design.²⁴

By contrast, Herbert Read's foreword to the catalogue suggested that the exhibition served to reaffirm the universal 'truths' which found expression in art, and provided evidence of the underlying 'forms' uniting art and science. He quoted D'Arcy Thompson to support his claim: 'I know that, in the material study of material things, number, order, and position are the threefold clues to exact knowledge'. Read continued: 'Knowledge of form is the key to understanding not only in science but also in art'.²⁵ Read's earlier writing demonstrated that this was not intended as the prescription for a preferred, 'constructive' form of modern art practice. In 1944 he had written an essay on Henry Moore, an artist whose work he believed to exemplify a different, 'organic' form. He defined this as work that: '...does not reject measure ... but ... prefers to follow the path indicated by organic or biological evolution.'²⁶ This, said Read, was a different,

but equally valid form of modern art. Unlike Fuller, Read was able to accommodate both 'constructive' and 'organic' art into his aesthetic. He wrote that: 'To prefer the organic to the constructive ...is merely to express a prejudice.'²⁷ Although Read's critical position was seen by Fuller to betray a misguided idealism, it was tolerance towards a range of modern art practices and styles that typified Read's criticism.²⁸

Despite clear differences between the critical positions held by Read and Fuller they appear to share some common ground on the subject of Art and Nature. Read had established the compatibility of his two categories of modern art by stating that: 'The constructive principle, whether in architecture or in sculpture...is a perfectly legitimate derivation from natural premisses; so is the organic principle'.²⁹ What linked these forms of art in Read's view was their shared roots in 'nature': an argument he had pursued during the thirties in defence of Unit One.³⁰ In an essay entitled 'Human Art and Inhuman Nature' Read had discussed the relationship between 'Art' and 'Nature': 'It may be that Nature contains all the elements, in colour and form, which go to the composition of a work of art, just as the keyboard contains all the notes necessary for the art of music. But Whistler, who used this analogy, went on to say that "the artist is born to pick and choose..."³¹ It was this faculty of 'imagination' that Read went on to discuss. Like Fuller he believed that it was through an imaginative transformation of 'Nature' that artists could discover and express the 'universal truths' underlying the human condition. Furthermore, Read demonstrated some correspondence with Fuller when he cited John Ruskin as the critic with a particular insight into this faculty.³²

The critical positions of Read and Fuller converge in a shared belief that man will only find spiritual insight through a reconciliation between 'Art' and 'Nature'. Following Fuller's death in 1990, it was this convergence of ideas that led the art critic David Cohen to suggest that Fuller's work, in retrospect, could be seen as a continuation of Read's. In an essay called 'The Case of Two Critics - Herbert Read and Peter Fuller', he wrote that: 'Their common purpose was to argue a redemptive mission for art in an industrial, materialist society, the vital and necessary antidote to the soulless, destructive, and debilitating effects of modernity'.³³ This claim was pursued by emphasising certain themes found in Read's criticism. These were: his pessimism concerning the damaging effects of a

'modern', mass culture; his belief, motivated by humanist rather than religious ideals, that the function of art was to redeem and elevate human life; and his emphasis on the role of the 'community'. All of these, Cohen asserted, were consistent with Fuller's own values and concerns. This lent weight to his claim that Fuller's project was not idiosyncratic but a continuation of a respected tradition of English criticism. Notwithstanding the apparent consistency between the critical positions held by Read and Fuller, the *difference* between the two men remains a crucial one which is overlooked by Cohen. Unlike Fuller, Read had maintained a commitment to a broad range of modern art practices. It was only later, during the fifties, that Read's call for caution and moderation was more clearly articulated.³⁴ What Cohen's essay does serve to demonstrate, though, is the way in which Fuller's critical position became, in the eighties, an emblem of a wider constituency in Britain for whom a form of middle-class 'cultural pessimism' remained the predominant mood. One of the characteristic features of this constituency was the distinctively conservative inflection of 'liberal' values.

Apart from this general anxiety expressed for mankind's spiritual welfare and the belief that 'good' art could minister to these needs there were other, more specific, areas of social life which found a focus in Fuller's publications. The first dealt with issues of 'ecology' and 'the countryside'. In the closing paragraph of his article 'Against Internationalism', published in 1986, little more than a year before the first issue of *Modern Painters*, he stated his aspiration that: 'By being true to their native traditions, British artists may be able to make a unique contribution to the new, emerging "structure of feeling", which would appear to be essential for the survival of the world, as a whole.'³⁵ In Fuller's view such a project had only become possible through a new understanding of the relationship between science, biology and art, and the sense of a new unity of man with nature.³⁶

An art event held at the Tate Gallery, London in 1989, called *Trees at the Tate*, suggests that Fuller's views were more widely shared.³⁷ The organizing group was 'Common Ground': 'a charity which aimed to forge new links between the practice and enjoyment of the arts and the conservation of landscape, nature and place.'³⁸ The programme of events, exhibitions and publications centred on their project 'Trees, Woods, and the Green Man' were intended to: '...heighten

significance is increasingly recognised, their cultural and spiritual significance is less well known'.³⁹ The events, intended for both adults and children, consisted of film and video events ranging from *The Tales of Beatrix Potter* to *Company of Wolves*; documentaries on trees; documentaries on artists associated with the landscape, including Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, J.M.W. Turner and Max Ernst; competitions and workshops; and lectures. One of the lecturers was the writer and founder director of 'Common Ground' Richard Mabey. He had also been an occasional reviewer of books and exhibitions for *Modern Painters* and had reviewed Fuller's *Theoria* in one issue.⁴⁰

It is significant that the logo used for 'Common Ground' which appeared on the Tate Gallery information included the words 'Trees Woods and the Green Man' and incorporated a drawing of a tree attributed to Ben Nicholson.⁴¹ The use of Nicholson's work draws attention to certain similarities that existed between the concerns of 'Common Ground' in the eighties and those of 'modern' British artists during the thirties and forties. It has already been discussed how during this earlier period there was an increased interest in 'the countryside' and artists became involved in the production of many publications, including the Shell Guides and Posters. The invocation of landscape, both prehistoric and modern, symbolised a wider anxiety over the perceived loss of 'tradition' and 'permanent values' and a concern that 'Britishness' was being eroded.⁴² The specific emphasis by 'Common Ground' on the symbolic value of 'the tree' has a particular resonance with John Piper's essay of 1937, 'Lost, a valuable object'. Here Piper appealed for a return to 'the tree in the field', believing it to be a potent motif of stability and 'fullness'.⁴³

One thing which emerged from the earlier discussion of the thirties was the tension that existed between the ideals associated with the practice of the 'modern' artist on the one hand and a concern for maintaining 'permanent values' associated with 'Britishness' on the other. One possible consequence of this tension was a form of insular conservatism. An article appeared in the *New Statesman and Society* contemporary with the events organized by 'Common Ground' which made just this point. After the importance of the group's activities had been affirmed by the writer, a note of caution was expressed: '...often conflicting ideologies in woodland attitudes or management in the more literary or artistic realm of culture are cloaked in appeals to universal human

feelings for nature. On inspection these feelings often turn out to naturalise an authoritarian social order...'⁴⁴ The consequence of this, as already witnessed in the earlier consideration of the thirties, is that 'tradition' is emphasised and conservatism dominates. It may be argued that 'conservatism' has a positive role - that it is a term to describe those who are concerned about preserving those aspects of a culture which give to a nation some sense of 'tradition' or shared identity. But it has also been observed throughout this study that when terms such as 'tradition' and 'national identity' are invoked as positive traits it is usually at the expense of 'the modern'. That is, when 'conservatism' is represented as a virtue it is often accompanied by an intolerance or hostility towards 'the modern'.

It can thus be argued that by selecting certain works of art believed to be particularly meaningful for our time, the activities of groups such as 'Common Ground' risk promoting a narrow purview of 'great' art and culture that serves to affirm those values and ideals which naturalise an authoritarian social order. Yet a distinction should be made between the didactic interests of this group whose intentions were generally 'ecological' and another, less coherent, grouping which is identified by a shared concern for the 'country life' with an emphasis on 'traditions' and 'mores'. This latter group is exemplified in the increased publication of rural magazines during the eighties. The *New Statesman and Society* observed this development and commented that: 'At one time there was *Country Life* and *The Field*, and that was about it. Now we have the *Country Times*, *Country Homes and Interiors*, *Country Living* and an absolute plethora of specialist magazines devoted to walking, gardening, riding and, of course, hunting, shooting and fishing.'⁴⁵ The article printed extracts from letters found in some of these magazines indicating that people were searching the countryside for evidence of 'permanence' and consolation. The editorial from an anniversary edition of *The Field* was quoted, demonstrating how the values and ideals embedded in 'national identity' were at the root of this search:

deeper realities...have not changed - national characteristics like fidelity to country in all senses, beliefs in and regard for the standards of our ancestors, whether materially or in principle...We shall not abandon those expressions of British character to which the nation patently wishes to stay true. We stand for the good life in all its wholesome aspects. We leave

the transient follies of the day to others.⁴⁶

In general terms the predominantly ecological concerns of *Common Ground* would tend to associate them with the Centre or the Left, while the emphasis in many country magazines on property, hunting and shooting would tend to associate them with the political Right. Taken together, however, these two groupings demonstrate that the heightened preoccupation with 'the countryside' during the eighties had a broad base of support across the political spectrum, or it maybe suggests that the 'centre' ground of this spectrum had moved to the Right. Despite their differences in outlook and motivation there was a level at which the the interests and concerns of the two groups coincided. What united them was a claim that cherished values and beliefs were being eroded and that 'turning to nature' offered a solution. There was a conviction that through 'Art', and especially through an evocation of 'the landscape' spiritual 'truths' could be found and some consolation and spiritual and imaginative insight would be discovered. Fuller's views as expressed in *Modern Painters* focussed on just these themes and consequently found support along a continuum ranging from political Right to Left.

A second example to be discussed is art and education. It is chosen because it focuses on a different, yet fundamental, aspect of social life. It also exposes the political divisions more clearly than the previous example and provides a further opportunity to look at any convergence of interests and concerns across political divides.

During the eighties educational reform from school to university level was planned and implemented by successive Conservative governments. At school level, however, many of the fundamental ideas underlying these changes were voiced much earlier in the seven *Black Papers* published 1969-1977.⁴⁷ Two of the key figures responsible for them were C. B. Cox, Professor of English at Manchester University, and Conservative M.P. Rhodes Boyson. The key concern of these publications was 'falling standards' and the imperative was to reassert 'tradition' against the tide of 'permissiveness'. Rhodes Boyson concluded *Black Paper 2* by stating this objective: 'It is time our society realized the need for most of its traditional values, and decided to stand by them ... Traditional methods of study are generally short cuts to knowledge. Many new methods have been

introduced as experiment for experiment's sake and to help bored teachers, not bored children.'⁴⁸

Margaret Thatcher's drive for educational reform maintained the same critical thrust: Left-wing teachers were blamed for 'falling standards' and had to be rooted out; 'traditional' methods and a study of 'basics' had to be restored. In her own recollections of the period she wrote that: '...too many teachers were less competent and more ideological than their predecessors. I distrusted the new 'child-centred' teaching techniques, the emphasis on imaginative engagement rather than learning facts...'⁴⁹ The legislation to bring about widespread changes in education in schools was embodied in the Education Reform Act of 1988. One important strand of this was the implementation of a National Curriculum. This enabled central government to gain control of curriculum content and to prescribe standardised tests for all pupils. While the government saw the National Curriculum as a means of correcting 'failing' schools it also provided the opportunity to introduce an emphasis on 'national identity' in some subject areas. This was apparent in the controversy surrounding the formulation of the History syllabus. Thatcher recalled her feelings at the time: 'In July 1989 the History Working Group produced its interim report. I was appalled. It put the emphasis on interpretation and enquiry as against content and knowledge. There was insufficient weight given to British history.'⁵⁰

It can be seen from the foregoing discussion of the attitudes of the Conservative Party towards education that there were several key themes. These were: 1. that there was evidence of 'falling standards'; 2. that the 'progressive' ideas of the Left had led to spurious notions of 'freedom' and 'free-thinking'; 3. that 'traditional values' such as 'knowledge' and 'basics' had to be reasserted; and 4. that due emphasis should be given to learning about 'national identity' and 'British heritage'. It is in the context of these central themes that some consideration should now be given to those writers whose views on art education appeared to challenge the prevailing Conservative ideology.

In the face of educational reform many educationalists wrote in defence of their subject areas, particularly if legislation appeared to marginalize that subject. Peter Fuller showed concern for school art and upheld the work of two writers, who in their turn affirmed Fuller's work.⁵¹ The first was Rod Taylor, whose book

Educating for Art - critical responses and development became an established textbook for students and teachers of art in the late eighties.⁵² The second was Peter Abbs, for whose book Fuller wrote the foreword.⁵³ Both Taylor and Abbs advanced ideas and aspirations which had been argued for in the Gulbenkian Report published in 1982.⁵⁴ The report clearly perceived the need to raise the profile of the arts at a time when they appeared to be under attack: '...the Government has issued curriculum guidelines which have little to say about the arts. It has become clear, too, that the continuing cuts are having effects on the quality and range of education as well as on its provision.'⁵⁵ The Gulbenkian Report, and the writing of Taylor and Abbs, argued for the primacy of a liberal arts education for all children. The arts, argued the Gulbenkian Report, developed 'the full variety of human intelligence', 'the education of feeling and sensibility', 'the exploration of values', 'an understanding of cultural change and difference' and 'physical and perceptual skills'.⁵⁶

Taylor's book focussed on the teaching of art history and critical studies in secondary schools and offered practical advice on resourcing and teaching techniques. It was perhaps as a consequence of the Government's apparent neglect of the arts that Taylor's book, like the Gulbenkian Report, set out to prove that the arts could be as rigorous and relevant as any other subject. There is, however, an important sense in which Taylor's analysis comes close to the Conservative Party's preoccupation with 'what went wrong'. He believed that the teaching of art history had deteriorated since the seventies and saw Berger's *Ways of Seeing* as largely to blame for the development of negative attitudes. He wrote: 'A consequence of Berger's book, besides affecting art teachers' attitudes to gallery visiting, has also been to debunk the notion of civilisation - epitomised particularly through the work of Lord Clark - as being reflected in a chain of great works stretching through the centuries'.⁵⁷ Here, Taylor evoked 'civilisation' and 'tradition': two themes which have been seen to find some resonance with the concerns of the Conservative Party. In *Theoria* Fuller used this quotation from Taylor to emphasise his own thesis about the widespread damage caused by Berger's ideas. He followed this with a conclusion that Taylor had not drawn himself: 'Berger's *Ways of Seeing* was, in effect, part of that whirlwind of cultural vandalism which prepared the way for that condition of artistic desolation, often called "post-modernism"...'⁵⁸

While Taylor's critique of the errors and requirements of teaching art history was generally uncontentious and restrained in tone, Peter Abbs wrote with a stridency that matched Fuller's. He, too, set out to analyse 'what went wrong' and, like Fuller, blamed the 'progress' of modernism. In an article for *Art Monthly* entitled 'The Four Fallacies of Modernism' he stated his intention to '...turn on the modernist spirit' by asking '...subversive questions of the self-consciously subversive'.⁵⁹ For Abbs, as for Fuller and many other critics ranging across the political spectrum, the deterioration in society was clearly evident by the sixties. In his criticism of school and college art he used terms which are indistinguishable from those of the *Black Papers* or from Thatcher's condemnation of the History Syllabus. He wrote: 'It remains symptomatic that in many art colleges and in many school art-courses today the work of the artist is labelled "a mode of enquiry", a form of "visual research", "an assembling of data", a method of "problem-solving"... Such language continues to mediate and perpetuate a form of aesthetic and cultural betrayal.'⁶⁰ He finished his article by speculating on the direction that art should take: 'After Modernism there is nowhere to turn but back and further back into our diverse historic cultures and down and further down into the depths of our existence, until the two tracks converge and become one'.⁶¹ Here Abbs saw 'good art' as 'naturally' converging on 'national characteristics' and, in some metaphysical sense, revealing a better understanding of 'human nature' and 'spiritual life'. There is also an implication in the phrase 'down and further down into the depths of our existence' that some mystical communion with a psychologized 'Nature' was sought after.

It can be suggested, then, that the resonance of Fuller's writing, especially of *Modern Painters*, lay in the way that themes were struck-up which found wide-ranging support that could not be attributed exclusively to either the Right or Left. From the foregoing discussion the role of art can be seen as a central one for transmitting the persistent concerns and values which were shared by this broad constituency. The themes invoked emphasised 'tradition' and 'civilized values', frequently with a nationalist inflexion, while the overall call was for 'conservation' rather than 'change'. The 'change' believed to be so damaging to the British social and cultural fabric was seen by many to spring from the 'modernist' project and both Right and Left turned to the post-war years for evidence of 'what went wrong'. A dilemma was faced by some on the Left. The 'modernist' project had always been associated with the challenge to tradition,

authority and parochialism and consequently socialists had often tended to ally themselves with its concerns. This 'loss of faith' by many on the Left led some to embrace the conservatism that 'modernism' had always refused. Consequently, a type of cultural pessimism was expressed which exemplified what Habermas defined as 'anti-modernism'.⁶² As early as 1961 the historian E. P. Thompson perceived the growing pessimism of intellectuals on the Left and claimed that it was having a debilitating effect on radical political change. He believed that the liberal intellectual:

often does not notice the real forces which determine our political life, because he does not feel *himself* to be unfree...

...Moreover what he wants to say serves only too often as an intellectual gloss upon the status quo. How else are we to describe this curious dichotomy in our intellectual life, whereby a profound spiritual pessimism is found at one pole, and a complacent belief in the efficacy of piecemeal reform at the other? Both attitudes coexist within the same minds. It is because man's nature is evil (so the argument runs) that we must shelter behind institutions from our own propensities. The experience of this tormented half-century has taught us that stability is the supreme social value. Since any major structural change would entail a social imbalance in which forces of irrationalism might assert themselves, we are condemned to accept the established fact.⁶³

An article appeared in *The New Statesman and Society* on the launch of *Modern Painters* which exemplifies well this ambivalence on the Left.⁶⁴ After some initial criticisms of the journal, there was approval for Fuller's 'invigorating bombast' although, it continued, his 'followers tend to be dull' and 'The flood of the great and the good who swelled the first hundred page issue produced a peculiar democracy of the generally pissed-off...' Then, in terms that are consistent with the critique of Modernism offered by Fuller and Steiner, the merits of Fuller's 'plain speaking' are contrasted with the 'Artspeak' of the modern art world. The article closed with the sentence: 'I can't help feeling that *Modern Painters* is better than we deserve'. This is not a phrase expressing unequivocal approval for

the journal but one that expresses a certain resignation about, and loss of confidence in, the legacy of 'modernism'.

Unlike those considered so far, there were writers and artists who had little sympathy with the constituency represented by *Modern Painters*. Toni del Renzio was such a critic. He had been associated with the 'Independent Group' in the fifties and during the eighties fiercely opposed the artistic conservatism represented by Fuller. His response to Fuller's article 'Against Internationalism' which was discussed earlier, provides a vivid illustration of the strengths and weaknesses of those contesting Fuller's position.

The title of del Renzio's response, 'Fuller What? Parish Pump Aesthetics', appeared in *Art Monthly* two months after Fuller's initial article.⁶⁵ A central thread of del Renzio's argument was to reassert the importance of 'Internationalism', a characteristic of 'modernism' he believed to be vital for the production of any art of quality: 'This is a characteristic of all great art, that it enters into a dialogue with all other art. Great art, however provincial its immediate origins, is also and necessarily international'.⁶⁶ Del Renzio's intervention was an important one because it challenged the closures artistic conservatism had placed around certain types of art and art practice. He also expressed the hope that it might open up constructive debate. Yet the tenor of del Renzio's response was one of disdain for the 'ignorance' and 'philistinism' of those responsible for guiding British taste. He also questioned Fuller's account of 'seminal' British artists such as Samuel Palmer and Graham Sutherland, and writers and critics such as John Ruskin and Kenneth Clark, proposing instead his own view of their value and significance. Del Renzio became embroiled in an argument with Fuller over the details of a 'British tradition', thus enabling Fuller to evade the larger issue of 'Internationalism' in his subsequent reply. Instead correspondence between the two men continued until April 1987 in a similar vein with Fuller, quite justly, reproving del Renzio for his ignorance of detail.⁶⁷

One thing of significance emerging from this contest was the tone of confidence and authority expressed by Fuller. The artist and critic David Batchelor, who had been a regular contributor to *Artscribe*, commented on the need to do more than be drawn into a dispute with Fuller over the relative merits of individual artists: '...it is more important to examine Fuller's reasoning, as it is on the basis of this

that his judgements stand or fall.⁶⁸ He offered the following analysis:

His writing in *Modern Painters* is nothing if not consistent ... Decline, Fall, Redemption, Spirit, Ruskin: it's as regular as a dripping tap. But this regularity, the repetition of stock phrases, names, adjectives and ideas is far from incidental and not at all a sign of tiredness in their author. Rather, it is all a necessary structural component of his writing; it is what gives his claims their shape; it *is* his argument.⁶⁹

Batchelor suggested that it was 'dogmatic insistence' rather than 'discernible rigour' which characterised Fuller's judgement.⁷⁰ Other critics, too, expressed the opinion that any adequate critique of Fuller's position needed to take into account the way he persistently and effectively closed off a consideration of other art and artists.⁷¹ Yet the difficulty of sustaining such a strategy in the face of Fuller's confident claims can be seen from a further example.

In the fourth issue of *Modern Painters* Philip Dodd, a university lecturer and writer on 'Englishness', had 'an open letter' published on 'Art, History and Englishness'.⁷² Unlike del Renzio his tone was temperate. He stated his intention to: '...let a whiff of history into this argument and try to understand why and in what circumstances and with what effects claims for an English national art have been advanced ... it is done, I hope, in such a way as to leave open the possibility of dialogue'.⁷³ Dodd went on to indicate how he feared that an emphasis on national identity could result in an abuse of 'the Other', and he argued instead for both 'cosmopolitanism' and 'localism'. He also raised the important issue that 'Englishness' was a problematic concept that: '...does not have a settled and continuous identity, but has been constituted and reconstituted at various historical moments - for very different reasons'.⁷⁴

Dodd's article took up a double-page spread. Fuller's response was an advertisement for his new book taking up half of the last column. It read: 'My answer to Philip Dodd is *Theoria* my thrilling new book...' At one level it is not unreasonable to see Fuller's reply as being arrogant, contemptuous and self-seeking. On another level, however, it is more revealing to see this as a further example of Fuller's ability to carry conviction and authority with an appeal to the

'common-sense' of his assertions.

The cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, has analysed the eighties in a way that is pertinent to an understanding of Fuller's critical position. Three aspects of his thesis are of particular relevance here. The first is about 'common-sense'. He has written:

To a significant extent, Thatcherism is about the remaking of common sense: its aim is to become the 'common sense of the age'. Common sense shapes our ordinary, practical everyday calculation and appears as natural as the air we breathe. It is simply 'taken for granted' in practice and thought, and forms the starting-point (never questioned or examined) from which every conversation begins ...⁷⁵

It is this belief in the 'natural' truth of Fuller's assertions that places him, as Batchelor suggested, outside the need for logical argument.

A second point to be drawn from Hall is that the 'common sense' he identifies is not to be seen as somehow expressing an indefinable 'spirit of the age'. There are, he feels, certain material conditions which enable such 'common sense' to gain currency:

What Thatcherism as an ideology does, is to address the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community...⁷⁶

Thirdly, Thatcherism is seen by Hall to have required a mobilization of 'the people' to oppose the 'mistakes' that social democracy had made since the war. This he described as 'populist' rather than a 'genuinely popular campaign'.⁷⁷ It is a crucial distinction and, as Hall explains, a strategic one:

...the arousal of populist sentiment must be cut off at just the correct moment, and subsumed or transformed into the identification with authority, the values of traditionalism and the

smack of firm leadership. It is an authoritarian populism.⁷⁸

Applying Hall's thesis to Fuller, there is again some sense of 'fit'. It has been observed in the foregoing discussion, for example, how his 'plain speaking' was seen as an attempt to communicate with a broader public. It has also been apparent that Fuller appealed to 'firm leadership' and the importance of figures of 'authority' for guiding aesthetic taste; whether they be from the past, such as John Ruskin and Sir Kenneth Clark, or contributors to his own journal, such as H.R.H. Prince of Wales and Lord Gowrie.

In these past chapters Peter Fuller has emerged as a representative of a broad constituency for whom 'conservative' seems the only appropriate designation. The word 'conservative' is used here not in any party political sense but to identify those who place a particular emphasis on the need to safeguard 'tradition' and 'national identity'. In terms of exemplary art practice, the conservative will often turn to representations of 'the landscape' or 'the figure' for work that is essentially 'British'. On the negative side, cultural conservatives also tend to demonstrate an attitude of pessimism, believing that little can be done to restore a lost 'order' in society. Such conservatives usually identify 'modernism' as the cause of the present 'crisis', whereas overtly 'political' Conservatives may, in another sense be rapacious 'modernizers' - as regards the introduction of new technology, for example.

If the definition of the cultural conservative just proposed adequately characterises a constituency in the eighties who held in common a particular cluster of beliefs, and expressed certain attitudes and preferences, then it also identifies a broad constituency which ranged from politically Left to Right. In the narrower sphere of art practice the difficulty of penetrating and challenging the closures imposed by a conservative and nationalist aesthetic have been witnessed. This testifies to the deep-rooted and continued belief in the articulation of culturally and ideologically conservative values such as 'common sense', 'firm leadership' and a 'respect for authority'.

REFERENCES:

- 1 This is Fuller's phrase from *Modern Painters*, Volume 1, number 1, (Spring 1988), p3.
- 2 Ibid., pp52-53.
- 3 Peter Fuller, *Theoria*, (London, 1988), p230.
- 4 Ibid., p231.
- 5 This is the overall theme of *Theoria*, the broad outlines of which are established in Fuller's own introduction, pp1-6
- 6 See, for example the articles on Bomberg, Freud, Sutherland and Bacon, and Oulton in the first issue. These are discussed in Chapter 11, pp201-204.
- 7 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (London, 1989). At the time Steiner was Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva.
- 8 *The Times*, 'Where there's God, there's hope', Catherine Bennett talked to George Steiner, 20 May 1989, p33; *The Guardian*, 'So God made Jazz', Geoff Dyer, 19 May 1989, p27. (Here, Dyer did not so much offer a critique of Steiner's thesis as argue that Steiner had ignored the importance of jazz). Fuller's review of the book, 'Sleepwalking with George Steiner', appeared on the same day, p26.
- 9 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, op cit., p3.
- 10 Ibid., p4.
- 11 Ibid., pp11-12.

- 12 *Ibid.*, p12.
- 13 *Ibid.*, Steiner discusses this on pp16-21.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p7.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p30. This is, ironically, Steiner's own 'world'. Although in Fuller's review of the book he enthusiastically endorsed Steiners thesis he pointed out that the book '...often lapses into precisely that Mandarin jargon which it sets out to oppose', *Guardian*, *op cit.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, p39.
- 17 Steiner talked of the appeal of the work of art as 'disinterested' in *ibid.*, p27, but did not explicitly mention Bell or Fry in his book. Although Fuller found Bell, Fry and Clement Greenberg to blame for the neglect of British Art, (see, for example, his article, 'The Englishness of English Art', *The Independent Magazine*, 17 September, 1988, pp52-55), Fuller accepted the concept of 'significant form', albeit on his own terms. See his discussion of Roger Fry and Clive Bell in *Theoria*, *op cit.*, pp157-159.
- 18 For a discussion of this see Chapter 11, pp198-199.
- 19 For Steiner's discussion of this 'journalistic' mentality see *Real Presences*, *op cit.*, pp26-30.
- 20 For Steiner's discussion of the effects of 'Americanization' see *ibid.*, pp32-39.
- 21 The *Guardian*, *op cit.* Richard Cork wrote an article on a memorial exhibition for Fuller in the *New Statesman and Society*, 22 March, 1991, pp34-35 entitled 'A wager on transcendence'. These were Steiner's words which, he said, Fuller often referred to.

- 22 *Growth and Form* is discussed in Chapter 9.
- 23 Peter Fuller, 'Art and Science', *Art Monthly*, number 103, February 1987, pp8-11.
- 24 The difference between Herbert Read and Reyner Banham in their understanding of *Growth and Form* is discussed in Chapter 9 pp158-159.
- 25 From the foreword to the exhibition catalogue *Growth and Form*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 4 July - 31 August, 1951.
- 26 Herbert Read, 'Henry Moore', *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, (London, 1964), pp195-215. This first appeared in 1944 as an introduction to a book on Henry Moore.
- 27 Ibid., p201. Here, Read uses D'Arcy Thompson to support his argument.
- 28 Fuller criticises Read in, for example, *Theoria*, op cit., pp182-183.
- 29 Herbert Read, 'Henry Moore', op cit., p201.
- 30 See Chapter 3, pp32-36, for a discussion of this.
- 31 Herbert Read, 'Human Art and Inhuman Nature', *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, op cit., pp73-87, p77. There is no original publishing date attributed to this essay. It is stated that it was 'a composite essay, with material from a broadcast and from an article published in *World Review*', p269.
- 32 Ruskin is frequently cited and affirmed in Read's essay 'Human Art and Inhuman Nature', *ibid.* It is also Ruskin's concepts of 'Theoria' and 'Aesthesis' which form the basis of Fuller's book

Theoria, op cit.

- 33 This essay appeared in the *Bulletin of the Archives and Documentation Centers for Modern and Contemporary Art*, (AICARC), published under the Auspices of the 'International Association of Art Critics', volumes 1&2, 1991, pp6-10, p7.
- 34 This aspect of Read's critical position is discussed in Chapter 9, pp154-155.
- 35 'Against Internationalism', *Art Monthly*, number 100, October 1986, pp12-14, p14. Although Fuller's use of the phrase 'structure of feeling' is not attributed to Raymond Williams it is taken from the latter's writing. See, for example, *The Long Revolution*, (London, 1961), section 3: 'Britain in the 1960s', pp293-355.
- 36 See the concluding chapter of *Theoria*, op cit., pp225-234.
- 37 'Trees at the Tate' took place during July-August 1989. Other events were 'The Tree of Life' at the Festival Hall during July-August, 1990 which then toured nationally until November; and 'Out of the Wood' at the Craft Council, London August - October, 1990.
- 38 From a broadsheet issued by the Tate Gallery detailing the events.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 See his review of *Theoria*: 'Fuller's Earth', *Modern Painters*, volume 2, number 1, (Spring, 1989), pp108-109. Mabey is not uncritical of Fuller's book but is generally supportive of its thesis.
- 41 Stephen Daniels, 'Wooden Heart', *New Statesman and Society*, 18 August, 1989, pp33-34. The 'Green Man' is the symbol of

- man's (sic) concern for 'nature'. He is defined in the article by Stephen Daniels, as 'the son, the lover and the guardian of the great earth goddess'.
- 42 For a discussion of this see Chapter 4, pp47-62.
- 43 This essay is from Myfanwy Evans, *The Painter's Object*, (London, 1937), pp69-73. It is discussed in this present study in Chapter 5, pp80-83.
- 44 Stephen Daniels, 'Wooden Heart', op cit., pp33-34, p34.
- 45 'Rural Retreats', *New Statesman and Society*, 2 September, 1988, p40-41
- 46 Ibid., p41.
- 47 These were published by *The Critical Quarterly Society*, London.
- 48 Rhodes Boyson, 'The essential conditions for the success of a comprehensive school', *Black Paper 2*, 1969. Reproduced in *Education in Great Britain and Northern Ireland - a source book*, edited by R. Bell, G. Fowler and K. Little, (Open University, 1973), pp137-141, p141.
- 49 Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, (London, 1993), p590. Her ideas concerning education can be found on pp590-599.
- 50 Ibid., p596.
- 51 Fuller's own attitude towards school art can be seen from his short essay, 'Art in Education', *Images of God*, (London, 1985), pp194-199.
- 52 Rod Taylor, *Educating for Art*, (London, 1986). Taylor's book

was based on the 'Critical Studies in Art Education Project', sponsored jointly by the School Curriculum Development Committee, the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Crafts Council. On page 93 Taylor's use of Fuller suggests a level of correspondence between their ideas.

53 Peter Abbs, *Living Powers: the Arts in Education*, (London, 1987). Abbs was lecturer in Education at Sussex University. The book was reviewed by Colin Painter in *Modern Painters*, Volume I, number 1, (Spring 1988), p96.

54 *The Arts in Schools - principles, practice and provision*, published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The advisory committee consisted of academics involved in arts education.

55 *Ibid.*, p2.

56 These headings are discussed more fully in *ibid.*, pp10 -12.

57 Rod Taylor, *op cit.*, p209.

58 *Theoria*, *op cit.*, p212.

59 *Art Monthly*, Number 106, May 1987, pp7-12, p7. Fuller is quoted several times in this article.

60 *Ibid.*, p10.

61 *Ibid.*, pp11-12.

62 Habermas is discussed in Chapter 10, pp183-184.

63 E. P. Thompson, 'The Segregation of Dissent', from *Writing by Candlelight*, (London, 1980), pp1-10, pp8-9. The book was a collection of essays mostly written during the seventies. This particular essay which discussed the way that the media both

accommodated and defused radical dissent included a footnote stating that it was written as a talk but finally rejected by the BBC.

- 64 Amanda Sebestyen, 'The fuller picture', *New Statesman and Society*, 17 June, 1988, pp48-49.
- 65 *Art Monthly*, number 102, December 1986 - January 1987, pp15-16.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p15.
- 67 See 'Correspondence', *Art Monthly*, number 103, February 1987, pp23-24, where Fuller pointed out del Renzio's consistent misspelling of Kenneth Clark(e) and his ignorance of the connection between Cresta Silks and Patrick Heron. Del Renzio admitted his errors in *Art Monthly*, number 105, April 1987, pp25-26. This contained a further response from Fuller, pp26-28, after which the editor announced the issue closed.
- 68 David Batchelor, 'The New Rote', *Oxford Art Journal*, volume 12, number 1, (1989), pp66-69, p68.
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 *Ibid.*, p69.
- 71 See, for example, Terry Eagleton, 'Anger and After', *Artscribe*, number 75, May 1989, pp94-96; Charles Harrison, "'Vichy': the state of British Art", *Artscribe*, number 70, Summer 1988, pp92-96; and Paul Wood, 'The Fortress of St Peter and St Paul', *Variant*, number 5, Summer/Autumn 1988, pp48-49.
- 72 Published in the Winter 1988/89 issue, pp40-41. Dodd had previously co-edited a book with Robert Colls called *Englishness - politics and culture 1880-1920*, (London, 1986).

- 73 *Ibid.*, p40.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p41.
- 75 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal - Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, (London, 1988), p8.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p167.
- 77 *Ibid.*, p72.
- 78 *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 13

Narratives of 'Britishness' - some exhibitions in the eighties.

In the last two chapters attention was focussed on, and around, the journal *Modern Painters*. It was demonstrated how its significance during the eighties lay in the way it articulated issues of national identity and modernism, not only in terms of the narrow compass of art, but also with regard to wider social issues. Furthermore, the values and ideals which stood as the hallmark of the journal were seen to characterize a broader conservative tendency which incorporated both those on the Left and Right. At the close of the previous chapter it was suggested that the term conservative could be most usefully employed in this context to describe those for whom a will to conserve transcended explicit political, let alone party, allegiances.

In this chapter, the analysis of several art exhibitions staged during the eighties is intended both to complement and extend those issues raised by the study of *Modern Painters*. It will be complementary in the sense that the curatorial intention for each exhibition was, again, a focus on 'Britishness'. Yet the analysis will also extend the previous discussion by attending to the way an exhibition, as a cultural form quite different from a journal, structures the visitor's understanding of national identity.

Two exhibitions that will receive particular attention here are *British Art in the 20th Century - The Modern Movement* held at the Royal Academy of Art, London in 1987, and *A Paradise Lost - The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935-55*, held at the Barbican, London, during the same year.¹ Other exhibitions which take a different approach to 'Britishness' will also be considered. The curators of exhibitions such as *Critical Realism* and *Art History*, for example, represented British life by selecting art from the eighties that articulated contemporary political or social concerns.²

An important issue to raise at the outset of this chapter concerns the plausibility of exhibitions which purport to demonstrate a coherent account of 'Britishness'. At this point there may be some value in returning to Lyotard's more general discussion of postmodernism.³ One of the primary tasks for the postmodernist, says Lyotard, is to challenge one of the characteristics of the 'modern' period -

the search for 'wholeness' or 'coherence'. The 'postmodernist' should maintain scepticism towards any claim for consensus: 'Postmodern knowledge ... refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable'.⁴

To extrapolate from Lyotard's general argument it could be said that exhibitions which claim to demonstrate 'Britishness' do so by constructing narratives of, say, 'national temperament', 'the durability of tradition', 'the progress of civilization', or 'the British countryside'. The construction of such narratives would, in Lyotard's terms, amount to the assertion of, or striving towards 'wholeness' or 'unity'. The following discussion will look at the way different narratives of 'Britishness' were articulated at several art exhibitions. It will also address the question, what does the identification of such narratives reveal about the relationship between 'the modern' and 'Britishness'?

British Art in the 20th Century was the second in a series of exhibitions staged by the Royal Academy of Arts which proposed to look at the relationship between the 'modern movement' and 'national characteristics'.⁵ The British show had been preceded by one on German art in 1985, and two further exhibitions have since taken place on Italian and American art. The curatorial intention of the British show was to select '...a relatively small number of representative artists who have been influential in the furtherance of the modern movement'.⁶ This begs the question, why was this exhibition being staged by the Royal Academy, a body usually associated with a defence of 'tradition' and an antagonism towards 'the modern'?⁷ This question will be returned to at a later point. At first it is necessary to consider what the curators set out to demonstrate through this exhibition.

Some insight into the criteria of selection can be gained from the 'Introduction' to the exhibition catalogue. It was written by the artist Frederick Gore, whose father, Spencer, had found fame as a 'modern' painter earlier in the century. Frederick Gore also sat on the executive committee of the Royal Academy and was one of five forming the selection committee for the exhibition.⁸ In the opening paragraph Gore outlined his approach to the 'British tradition': 'Succession in the history of art lies in the handing on by one painter to another of working methods, for adoption, absorption or rejection'.⁹ In his view the

exhibition would seek to identify the innate and enduring British 'tradition' which remained constant while the styles or ideas of 'modernism' were variously 'adopted', 'absorbed' or 'rejected' by twentieth century British artists. It is of particular significance for this present study that the 'enduring' characteristics chosen by Gore to exemplify his thesis were the same ones evoked by Herbert Read, Robin Ironside, and Nikolaus Pevsner before him.¹⁰ Four of these 'characteristics' will be considered here.

The first was Gore's assertion that the development of British art was founded on the reconciliation of opposites. At the outset of his essay he identified 'abstraction' as one form of art practice against which: 'In Britain, complementary to or even contradicting this bias towards abstraction, there is an equally strong desire to reflect the habits and thoughts and dreams of society. This is certainly related to the empiricist strain in British philosophy...'.¹¹ Gore argued here that while 'abstraction' at one time enabled the necessary 'purification of art from a cluttered nineteenth century' the enduring 'British tradition' was essentially a figurative one. A second characteristic of 'Britishness' which Gore alluded to was 'moderation'. For him, Paul Nash was the epitome of an artist who had successfully negotiated 'the modern' and avoided its extravagances. Gore wrote:

...with discretion he successively drew on Continental Cubism, Constructivism and Surrealism ... Artists who embraced unadulterated Surrealism lacked intellectual depth but Moore, Nash, and others who had joined the movement earlier and did not take the theory literally, made wonderful use of what had become common property.¹²

Such 'moderation' is linked to a third 'characteristic' suggested by Gore: the ability of those 'successful' British artists to be both dilettante and professional without being excessively either:

The thread of child-like primitivism that runs from the much loved early watercolours of the young Nash brothers to the present day has encouraged the theory that formal training is dangerous. This viewpoint has provided a counterbalance to the

almost obsessive technical investigations and thoroughness of many British artists.¹³

One further 'national' characteristic was asserted by Gore throughout his text. This concerned the 'practical' and 'realistic' way that British artists had represented society. He wrote: 'British figurative art, by tradition pragmatic and realistic, has been deeply concerned with society and its values'.¹⁴ For Gore it was Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud and Leon Kossoff who represented the most recently successful revival of this 'tradition'. Their ascendancy was seen by Gore as proof of the permanence of this British trait, and of the inadequacy of post-war American pop art and abstraction to express similar concerns: 'Where these attempts failed, Bacon, Auerbach, Freud and Kossoff succeeded each in his own way, and places of honour have been given to them in the exhibition...'¹⁵

Once Gore had established as mainstream a 'British tradition' of figurative art that bore the characteristics described above, he designated some other art as offering 'unconventional alternatives'.¹⁶ Here he included Gilbert and George, Richard Long and John Latham. He also offered a gloss on the intentions and motivations of other contemporary artists: 'Mark Boyle, Stuart Brisley, Art & Language, Victor Burgin, all represent the inventions which followed the impulse to carry sculpture into totally new directions'.¹⁷ The inaccuracy of attributing to these artists the unitary purpose of developing the concerns of sculpture is symptomatic of Gore's attempt to fit these 'unconventional' artists into the 'British tradition' he had already mapped out. For Gore the work of these artists was not 'critical' but 'alternative'. Put this way it no longer connoted dissent but testified to the variety and interest of the 'tradition' he had already described. Gore identified the art that, in his view, exemplified innately 'British' concerns. This is confirmed in Gore's final paragraph, where, despite differences in style and intention, 'British Art' is viewed as a seamless whole:

In British Art there are very many interrelationships and signs of continuity through the years, very many complementary oppositions and symptoms of a common ground well laid ... Indeed, there are so many links that there seems to be a coherence in British art in the twentieth century which suggests

a single overall movement (*una religio in rituum varietate*) and one which is durable.¹⁸

The development of a 'British tradition' as described by Gore was realised in the arrangement of the exhibition itself. A visitor entered into the first gallery, 'Camden Town and Bloomsbury', where, between them, these two groups were seen to be responsible for the formation of the 'modern movement' in Britain. From there galleries were thematic or focussed on groups or individuals. 'The Resilient Figure', 'The Everyday and the Visionary' and 'The Spirit of the Landscape' traced what were seen as the enduring traits of a figurative tradition. Henry Moore was accorded a gallery of his own at the centre of the exhibition with twenty two sculptures and drawings dwelling almost exclusively on his contribution to the figurative tradition. None of his work appeared elsewhere in the exhibition. Displayed in this way, it was Moore's 'individuality' that was celebrated, while any working relationship with his contemporaries, such as with members of *Unit One*, was overlooked.

The largest gallery of all, situated three-quarters of the way through the exhibition was titled 'The School of London and Anthony Caro'. Painters grouped under 'The School of London' were Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Leon Kossoff. In the exhibition catalogue there is one essay discussing these artists and another dealing with Caro's sculptures. One of Caro's earlier sculptures on display was a small work called *Woman Waking Up*, 1956. It represented the distorted human form using a heavily textured surface cast in bronze. These qualities enabled it to be accommodated in a gallery called 'Aspects of Sculpture in the Fifties' alongside work bearing similar traits by Kenneth Armitage, William Turnbull and Eduardo Paolozzi. It was more problematic for the curators to site Caro's later, and much larger, abstract pieces. The exhibition gallery guide referred to this problem: 'The scale of Caro's mature work has made it necessary to place his sculptures in this large gallery, separate from the early work'.¹⁹ This suggests that the situating of these five painters and one sculptor in the same gallery was prompted primarily by the constraints of gallery space. Bound by the need to demonstrate through the exhibition the development of a 'British tradition' as described by Gore, the curators found it difficult to find a more meaningful context for Caro's work. The strategic positioning of 'The School of London' at this point in the exhibition can

be read as the culmination and re-affirmation, in the eighties, of a 'British tradition' that had been mapped out by the curators. Gore saw these artists as representing both a 'return of interest to a form of painting in which the dualism of meaning in terms of life, is resolved', and as part of a continuing 'tradition' where '...strands lead back to Sickert, Bomberg and Matthew Smith'.²⁰ After this gallery four small rooms remained which did not easily relate to the 'tradition' developed up to this point. They housed the work of the sixties onwards, regarded by Gore as the 'unconventional alternatives'.²¹

One of these was the gallery called 'Breaking the Barriers'. This contained the work of Art and Language, Mark Boyle and Joan Hills, Stuart Brisley, Victor Burgin, Barry Flanagan and John Latham. If the placing of 'The School of London' in the overall formation of the exhibition is significant, so too is the placing of these artists. Their work, occupying as it did a literal *cui-de-sac*, could also be read as connoting an artistic 'dead-end', tolerated by, but outside, the dominant 'tradition'. A critical reading of the exhibition along these lines was made by Charles Harrison in his review for *Artscribe*.²² Perhaps Harrison's approach demonstrates how an effective challenge to the perceived conservatism and provincialism of exhibitions such as this require some interrogation of curatorial strategies. While this reading remains speculative, it does suggest, along with the discussion above, that at significant points in the exhibition the curatorial effort to demonstrate the 'cohesion' of the 'British tradition' appeared strained.

One further example of this can be cited. This concerns the two galleries that displayed work under the general heading of *Unit One*. The first, smaller one contained 8 works by Edward Burra. After passing through this the visitor entered the second gallery entitled 'Unit One - Towards Constructivism and Surrealism'. It formed the other literal *cui-de-sac* of the exhibition. The display consisted of paintings and sculptures: 8 works each by Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, 4 by Paul Nash, 3 by Edward Wadsworth and one each by John Piper and Victor Pasmore. Some initial observations can be made on this selection. Firstly, the number of paintings by Burra, and their setting apart from the others, accorded his work an importance that is disproportionate to his actual role in *Unit One*. Secondly, there are important omissions and inclusions: as already commented upon, Henry Moore was missing from the context of *Unit*

One, and the painters John Armstrong, John Bigge and Tristram Hillier were not included in the exhibition at all. Also, there was no mention or evidence of the group's association with the architects Wells Coates and Colin Lucas. In addition to this, the inclusion in the display of work by Piper and Pasmore was anomalous as neither artist belonged to the group. Thirdly, the work on show was not drawn exclusively from the period of *Unit One's* existence, that is from 1933-35, but extended from 1923 (Nash's, *The Shore*), to 1958 (Hepworth's, *Sea Form*).

The above evidence suggests that the curators overlooked or misrepresented the historical specificity of *Unit One* and the complex of issues which determined its formation. The two catalogue essays dealing with these galleries did not address, for example, the tensions and contradictions that artists such as Paul Nash expressed about how to be part of a 'British tradition' while also being 'modern'; about how to belong to a 'group' while remaining an 'individual'; about how to be a 'professional' artist committed to making money while also retaining some of the detachment of the dilettante; and about how to reconcile the twin demands of 'art' and 'design'.²³ The last of these is mentioned in the essay by Susan Compton but a weak connection between them is drawn: 'Nash wanted to include architects in this group as well as painters, sculptors and decorators, for he thought that together they might form an important movement'.²⁴ Although *Unit One's* aspiration to unite the arts remained largely idealistic and unrealised there is sufficient evidence to suggest that some of the members pursued this aim seriously.²⁵ Both the exhibition catalogue and the display itself omit any consideration of *Unit One's* concern to develop a working relationship between artists, designers and architects.

The choice of 'Towards Constructivism and Surrealism' as a subtitle for the gallery displaying most of *Unit One's* work, demonstrated that the main curatorial emphasis was on drawing out the stylistic differences between the artists. In Richard Cork's catalogue essay he concluded that the value of *Unit One* was that: 'Together and separately Surrealists and Constructivists forged links between Britain and the Continent which proved invaluable for a new generation of artists after the enforced isolation of the years of the Second World War'.²⁶ *Unit One*, occupying their own discrete gallery space were represented as an avant-garde 'moment'. As they implied in their respective essays, both Cork and Gore

believed that such 'avant-garde' activity was important not because it provided evidence of an art practice that challenged certain notions of the 'British tradition', but rather that such activity formed a reservoir of new 'ideas' which, to use Gore's terms, could be 'adopted' 'absorbed' or 'rejected' by British artists within that mainstream 'tradition'. Thus, the avant-garde was portrayed as a resource for updating styles and ideas, while the permanent traits of a 'British tradition' were seen to endure unchallenged.

Yet, like the work in the gallery 'Breaking the Boundaries', the placing of *Unit One's* 'Constructive and Surrealist' work as a literal cul-de-sac in the exhibition testified to its uneasy relationship with the mainstream 'tradition'. Significantly, the next gallery in the exhibition was 'Gwen John, Late Sickert and the Euston Road School'. This was represented as a resumption of the figurative tradition. The author of the exhibition gallery guide described this as an 'expression of no confidence in the avant-garde groupings of the moment' and quoted William Coldstream as saying that the Euston Road School instead: '...implied a movement towards realism'.²⁷ Therefore, the gallery 'Unit One - Towards Constructivism and Surrealism', interposed between the 'Gwen John...' gallery on one side and 'The Resilient Figure' on the other, became isolated from the mainstream. The separation of Burra's work from the other artists of *Unit One*, placed him, in a literal sense, outside this 'extreme' cul-de-sac and accommodated him instead within the narrative of a developing figurative tradition. After 'Gwen John...' the development of 'realism' as a central British trait continued to dominate the exhibition. It has already been discussed how for Gore, and by extension for the rest of the editorial panel too, the visitor would eventually 'arrive' at the 'School of London' with some sense that it was a 'natural' and ineluctable development of the 'British tradition'.

At this point some answers can be formed in reply to one of the questions posed at the outset of the present chapter. That is, why did the Royal Academy, a body usually associated with a defence of 'tradition' and an antagonism towards 'the modern', stage an exhibition such as this? It has emerged from the foregoing discussion that although the subtitle of the exhibition was 'The Modern Movement', a term connoting innovation and change, the primary intention of the curators was to identify 'permanent' British traits. Their overall strategy, demonstrated in the exhibition layout, was to evoke 'the modern' as a source of

ideas and styles, and to characterize those artists placed at the centre of a 'British tradition' as 'individuals' who selected from these ideas and styles while remaining distanced from 'extreme' commitment. During the seventies and eighties, when the social and cultural achievements of modernism were brought into question under the rubric of 'post-modernism', the reassertion of national identity again became more emphatic. It is in this context that the Royal Academy exhibition can be placed. At a time when, across the political spectrum, the question was asked 'What went wrong with Modernism?' it can be seen as entirely appropriate for the voice of a traditional institution such as the Academy to show the 'leadership' and 'authority' that many thought was needed.²⁸

The role and strategy of the Royal Academy in the staging of this exhibition can also be seen in terms of the unravelling of a carefully constructed narrative. It has already been observed, for example, how art was selected and deployed in the exhibition space as if to unfold a particular 'story' of 'British' art for the spectator. The curators seemed to assert that a central theme of this story, something that could be traced throughout the exhibition, was the development of a central core of innately 'British' characteristics. The occurrence of avant-garde 'moments' and 'unconventional alternatives' in this narrative, furnished it with 'colour' and enriched the 'story' with incident and diversion. Within the narrative of a dominant 'national identity', 'the modern' posed no real threat or challenge. British artists needed the stimulus of 'the modern', this narrative suggested, because it demonstrated an 'open-mind', but ultimately this was only of value if, in return, it contributed to the 'local colour' of the dominant 'national tradition'. 'The modern' could be resisted when necessary, as its imperative for 'change' and 'progress' would always be restrained by the inherent desire for 'permanence' and 'conservation' held at the heart of the 'British tradition'.

At this point some consideration of the critical reactions to the Royal Academy exhibition might help to indicate whether or not its account of British twentieth century art found general support. These can be discussed under two categories. The first were those who approved of the idea of charting the 'British' character of twentieth century art but were divided over who were the most significant artists and which were the most important movements. The second were those who questioned the very assumptions of tracing such a 'tradition'.

Richard Dorment's review in *The Daily Telegraph* expressed a whole-hearted affirmation of the curatorial intentions of the exhibition, and can thus be placed within the first of these categories.²⁹ He wrote: '...they have mounted a forceful argument for the case of British 20th century painting as the equal to the schools of Germany, France, and America'.³⁰ The suggestion here of different 'national traditions' competing for recognition is not explicitly made in the exhibition catalogue, yet Dorment's more blatantly chauvinistic inflexion does not seem inconsistent with the overall intentions of the show. In the second paragraph of his review, without any explanation, Dorment began referring to an 'English school' as though 'British' could be subsumed within the term 'English'. The character of this 'school' he described as '...eccentric, the sum of quirky individuals...'³¹ Like Gore, he identified some coherence between the work of different artists:

Gilbert and George's obsession with the underbelly of contemporary England is as hard to take as, I dare say, Sickert's paintings were in his day. Richard Long, a conceptual landscape artist of surpassing gentleness, is a lover of the English countryside as thoughtful as Gore (or Henry Moore) ever was.³²

These are not exactly the same connections that Gore had drawn, yet again they are not inconsistent with his. Both writers were united in asserting, without question, that qualities such as 'eccentricity' and 'individualism' formed the bedrock of an 'English' or 'British tradition'. This suggests that once commentators or critics had evoked these 'traits' they could then go on to use the range of work at the exhibition to articulate a variety of slightly different narratives, allowing them to place their own inflexion on the status or relationship of one artist to another.

Others joined Dorment in affirming the 'British' tradition, but were more critical of what the curators had omitted from the exhibition. One example of this was the ironically titled exhibition *Salon des Refusés* which ran concurrently with the Royal Academy show in a gallery less than half a mile away.³³ This contained thirty eight works from thirty artists, all of it two-dimensional apart from several relief panels. Despite the absence of sculpture the exhibition covered broadly the

same period and range of styles on view at the Academy show. Its main emphasis was not to challenge the overall narrative of the larger exhibition but to highlight the omission of particular artists. Most artists were represented with one piece of work. The exceptions were Augustus John (3 works); Alistair Morton (2 works); Alan Reynolds (2 works); Tristram Hillier (2 works); John Tunnard (2 works); and John Armstrong (3 works).

Two further examples of those who similarly questioned the Academy's selection of artists and 'movements' can be taken from the press. The first appeared in the *Sunday Times Magazine*.³⁴ Much of this article, rather than being overtly polemical, was styled as a synopsis of the 'foreign influence' on twentieth century 'English' art. The writer's concluding paragraph, however, was critical:

The exhibition...charts avant-garde progress in English 20th-century art from the days of Roger Fry's exhibition to the present, but in so doing it inevitably overlooks the "real ale" school of home-brewed English art in these years. This is the romantic, countrified, jolly stuff...³⁵

In another review John Spurling, writing for the *New Statesman*, criticised the curators of the Royal Academy show for putting the work into 'bureaucratic art-historical boxes' but declared his own intention to be '...less concerned with who has been left out'.³⁶ Nevertheless he was drawn to conclude that the organizers backed the 'figurative' strand and were responsible for the 'demotion' of the 'lyrical abstractions' by Hepworth and Nicholson, the 'neglect' of the Surrealists and Constructivists, and the 'playing down' of 'the passionate landscape element'.³⁷

The examples chosen for discussion above have ranged from Dormant's celebration of the exhibition, to the dissent shown by others over the relative status of particular artists and 'movements'. Yet what remained largely unchallenged in each of these accounts was the underlying premise of the exhibition itself. This assumed there to be a coherent development of twentieth century British art in which the effect of 'national traits' dominated over the interventions of 'the modern', thus always assuring the continuation of a 'national tradition'. What each account lacked was any attention to the tensions

and contradictions between 'Britishness' and 'the modern' that emerged from the Academy's intention to demonstrate a coherent tradition. Some critics, however, did show some consideration of this and they fall within the terms of the second category of writers mentioned above.

One such example was Andrew Brighton who wrote a review for *Art Monthly*.³⁸ He ignored completely the matter of who or what had been selected for the exhibition, and chose instead to describe what he felt to be a more important inadequacy:

The formative problem for British art is that it is made in a culture that has little means of thinking through High Art. ... the English don't have intellectuals. They have clerks.³⁹

Consequently, Brighton believed, everything at the exhibition was presented as: 'natural history of which questions should not be asked'.⁴⁰ He concluded:

All has been masticated, all has been ground down and tinned in the half-wit historicism of the English liberal establishment. This is art seen through a blanket dankly.⁴¹

Brighton maintained a tone of pessimism and despair and, although his argument was a forceful polemic, it lacked sophistication.⁴² Brighton's mood was picked up not unsympathetically by Anthony Barnett in an article from the following edition of *Art Monthly*.⁴³ He challenged Brighton's representation of the British as 'backward oafs', claiming instead that they were 'exceptionally imaginative and astute'.⁴⁴ He continued: 'Indeed, it has become important for British conservatism to fill the spaces in order to exclude the threat that modern art might define our appearance in the world ... It is because the British want to keep modern art at arm's length'.⁴⁵ Barnett suggested that a major retrospective of twentieth century British art might instead have considered:

...how the country's serious modern artists were dispersed and isolated despite their talent and intention, often from each other but especially from any defining role in their society. Such an exhibition would have tried to show what 'the moderns' were up

against. To do this it would need to include both lines of art in the United Kingdom - the official and the unofficial - the Munnings and the Moores, the Annigonis and the Auerbachs. Then the context of British painting might have emerged.⁴⁶

Both Brighton and Barnett then, although clearly differing in their tone and terms of analysis, provide evidence that there were critics whose concern was not primarily over the detailed selection of artists for the exhibition. They were anxious to draw attention to the conditions which enabled those in positions of power and authority to determine the dominant narrative of twentieth century British art for public consumption. Although no explicit reference is made by Brighton and Barnett to the Italian marxist Antonio Gramsci, their assertion that dominant groups have the power to 'naturalize' ideas for others is consistent with the process Gramsci describes as 'hegemony'.⁴⁷ During the late seventies and eighties Gramsci's theories were debated and deployed by a number of cultural theorists and critics on the Left, such as Terry Eagleton, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams.⁴⁸ It is within this general context that Brighton and Barnett's writing can be placed. There is a further implication to this discussion of critiques which resist or contend dominant narratives. That is, what specific forms of resistance or alternative strategies might be undertaken by artists and critics? This question will be returned to later.

At this point the exhibition *A Paradise Lost* will be introduced because it articulated a narrative of 'Britishness' just as the Academy exhibition had done. Another reason for considering *A Paradise Lost* is that it was shown in 1987, the same year as the Academy exhibition, and in many ways its aims can be seen to complement rather than contradict the Academy show. This was certainly the view of Peter Fuller. Although he joined others in criticizing the Academy's selection of work, and its down-playing of the neo-Romantic element, he praised both shows:

These two exhibitions confirmed what had been readily apparent in the 19th century to French critics like Charles Baudelaire and Ernest Chesneau: namely that the best British art was not that which most mimicked European, or, latterly, American modernist movements; rather those British artists

whose work achieved the highest stature commonly exhibited what can best be described as an informed, and often intransigent, insularity.⁴⁹

One noticeable feature of the Barbican show was that the catalogue was not written or designed as a room-by-room guide but served to corroborate and extend the exhibition's primary aim. This aim was two-fold. First, to revive interest in a range of art work produced between the thirties to the fifties under the rubric of British 'Neo-Romanticism'. Second, to contend that, by its 'resistance' to certain aspects of modernism, this work from an earlier period found parallels in the eighties. The foreword to the catalogue, co-written by Jane Alison, the exhibition organizer, and John Hoole, the Barbican gallery curator, saw this project as a significant historical intervention, which was of major relevance in the eighties:

It is not difficult to call to mind a parallel with our contemporary society: the ever broadening spiral of inhumanitarian acts; nuclear proliferation; the repression of human rights; the loss of self-respect; spiritual and aesthetic neglect; the destruction of our natural resources and the sickness of our popular media. Never has 'the quest' been more significant.⁵⁰

'The Quest' was an important emblem for this show and the front of the catalogue featured a painting of this title by Cecil Collins.⁵¹ The above statement expressed both a sense of despair concerning the state of the world in the present day and a claim that only through 'the quest' would consolation, renewal and redemption be found. Such a formulation would have found approval from Peter Fuller and other like-minded 'cultural pessimists'.

The curator of the exhibition, David Mellor, wrote in his preface to the catalogue that the precise timing of this show had been the consequence of an historical imperative:

Neo-Romanticism has returned, years after it was repressed and edited out of the history of British art and culture. It has returned at precisely the moment when the high confidence of

Modernism has everywhere been put in doubt ... Perhaps a reassessment of the style is possible within our own, more pluralist, Post-Modern cultural climate.⁵²

Mellor used the term 'Post-Modern' positively, in the restricted sense that there was now a 'pluralism' evident through the development of a 'New Art History'. This, he believed, provided new methodologies and enabled the subject to be considered from a range of new perspectives. As examples of this he cited the titles of some of the accompanying essays: 'Styles of the self' by Andrew Crozier, (who '...analyses the paradigm change that characterised poetry in the late 1930s and 1940s'); 'A Canterbury Tale: Powell and Pressburger's Film Fantasies of Britain' by Nannette Aldred, (who considers 'That imaginary, Arcadian country which Powell and Pressburger constructed'); and 'The Wartime Nocturne in British Painting, 1940-45' by Angela Weight, (who 'uncovers the iconography of wartime darkness').⁵³

Mellor's belief that 'pluralism' should be a central feature of the exhibition is evident from the range of exhibits. There were seventy seven exhibitors in all, with work comprising painting and illustration, posters, book jackets, newspaper advertisements, photographs and film stills. There was no three-dimensional work. Among the painters and illustrators John Piper was best represented with twenty five works in a variety of media. Those artists represented by fifteen or more works each were: Michael Ayrton, Cecil Collins, John Craxton, John Minton, Leslie Hurry and David Jones. The inclusion of thirteen landscape photographs and only one drawing and four paintings by Paul Nash was indicative of a curatorial emphasis on photography as a dominant feature of the exhibition. This included seven images by Bill Brandt showing aspects of English rural life and countryside during and after the war, and thirty one photographs covering similar themes by Edwin Smith taken between 1935-1959. The inclusion of these documentarists was seen by Mellor to complement painters such as John Piper who formed the 'topographers' of the thirties and forties.⁵⁴

It has already been mentioned that the exhibition catalogue itself *did not* assist the visitor to view the galleries. The exhibition broadsheet, also written by Mellor, was devised for this purpose. In the introductory paragraph of this broadsheet the 'neo-Romantics' were characterised as a united front against

'Nazi Germany':

Artists such as Graham Sutherland, John Piper, John Craxton, John Minton, Michael Ayrton, Robert Colquhoun and Keith Vaughan, together with poets like Dylan Thomas, film directors such as Michael Powell and photographers such as Bill Brandt, Eric Hosking, Edwin Smith and W.A. Poucher, developed this new romanticism, or Neo-Romanticism as it was called at the time. The movement was spread across the arts and put emphasis upon myth, spirituality and cultural nationalism.⁵⁵

Mellor was making two claims here. The first was to assume that the diverse range of artists he referred to shared one common aim 'to map Britain's Romantic self-image: a fantasy island of history that was now under bomb and missile attack from Nazi Germany'. The second was to assert that if such a deep and widespread cultural coalition did exist then it also possessed the collective spiritual and moral 'weight' to resist an 'enemy'. While that enemy was Fascism in the thirties, it was, in the eighties, the more nebulous, but no less dangerous, forces of spiritual and moral neglect.

The arrangement of the exhibition itself was thematic rather than chronological and emphasised further the curatorial intention of tracing, and extolling, a particular form of spiritual 'quest'. All the following quotations are extracts from Mellor's commentary on the exhibition broadsheet. There were twelve galleries, each one dominated by the themes of nature and the countryside. The first, 'The Other Eden', dwelt on the 'arcadian representation of the nation', with the countryside represented as a source of sanctuary, hope and renewal. The second, 'The Quest', included work by Collins, Richards and Sutherland, and demonstrated their 'apocalyptic fears set against a material world'. This was followed by 'Tracing Ancient Britain', showing David Jones' Arthurian evocations and Alan Sorrell's reconstructions of prehistoric sites. Next was 'Recording Britain', where the Shell Guides were displayed alongside the work of topographers such as Piper, Brandt and Smith. 'Renishaw Hall', the next gallery, included a number of Piper's depictions of this stately country house. Mellor's commentary made it clear that this gallery amounted to more than just another subsection of 'the countryside'. The Sitwells owned Renishaw Hall and provided

patronage for artists, writers and composers: 'Between them the family had staked out an alternative Modernist tradition in Britain; revivalist, playful, ornamental and oriented towards the margins of art history'. Just what this *alternative* Modernist tradition amounted to is unclear. Perhaps Mellor saw this 'tradition' as a paradigm of 'British' moderation: here was an 'updating' of styles coupled with the 'successful' resistance by the English eccentric and dilettante to modernist 'theory'. The sixth gallery 'Sheltering in the Fortress' provided: 'images of endurance, devastation and the continuity of life inside the "island Fortress" during the war'. Paul Nash's *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)*, 1941-2, was included along with Walter Thomas Monnington's *Tempests Attacking Flying Bombs*, c1944. Nash's ambiguous painting of destruction contrasted with the latter's academic approach to the subject of British aerial strength.

After the theme of 'attack' the next two galleries were offered as a complementary pair. 'The Overgrown Garden', gallery seven, showed the 'resurgence of nature ... as a sign of organic continuity after fire and shock'. Here, amongst others, was work by Denton Welch, Vaughan, Nash, Ayrton and Piper. Gallery eight, its complement, was entitled 'Tooth and Claw'. Mellor summed up the two galleries:

If Neo-Romantic images of flowers, vegetables and trees signified one side of the natural world in times of human stress, and offered consolations of fecundity and metaphors of growth, then representations of animals showed another, bleaker side.

'Tooth and Claw' showed work by Lucian Freud, John Craxton, Michael Ayrton, Robert Colquhoun and Ceri Richards, all depicting animals or birds as alien and threatening. It also included seven images from the natural history photographer, Eric Hosking.

The next three galleries digressed from the central theme of British Landscape and 'Nature' but alluded to other aspects of the 'Neo-Romantic character'. Gallery nine, 'Portraits of the Artist' showed artists such as Leslie Hurry and John Minton striking up theatrical or melancholy poses: 'Living up to romantic roles'. Gallery ten, 'Fantasies of Women', included representations of 'the woman's body ... lodged in its traditional role as a signifier of nature at large'. Gallery

eleven, 'The Mediterranean', included work by John Craxton, Lucian Freud, Michael Ayrton and John Piper as they escaped from the 'British "greyness"'. The final gallery 'A Grim Future' returned again to the central theme of 'threat' and destruction. It dwelt on images of post-war angst with paintings such as Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944, and Michael Ayrton's *The Captive Seven*, 1950.⁵⁶

The above overview of the curatorial scheme provides evidence for some speculative conclusions. Firstly, the exhibition has the English landscape at its heart, and progress through the galleries can be seen in the form of a narrative describing a journey through this landscape. This can be summarised as the discovery of: the landscape as sanctuary; the landscape as the source of 'tradition'; the landscape as both a source of renewal and a source of primitive 'threat'; and the landscape as the terrain of a continuing, and hazardous, quest. 'Nature' takes on two meanings. According to the first the 'English landscape' connotes permanence and authority - often this is demonstrated through the representation of specific 'places' or 'traditions'. The second refers to the 'dark' side of human nature often personified in representations of 'threatening' aspects of the 'English countryside'. 'The Quest', it seems, is that which seeks to uphold the former and suppress the latter: that is the victory of good over evil.

The second speculation that can be drawn from the above overview is based on the exhibition's representation of 'Neo-Romanticism' as a coherent movement with a specific 'quest'. Not only did this view determine the curatorial intention of the show but it was endorsed in a number of critical reviews.⁵⁷ Two other features of this 'movement' are implied by the organizers. The first was to claim that, to some extent, 'Neo-Romanticism' was timeless and stood outside of History. Notwithstanding the curatorial effort to establish the historical 'context' for the period covered by the exhibition, Neo-Romanticism was represented in the character of a spiritual and moral imperative that could 'speak' again in the eighties. The second implication was that the 'movement' derived from an essential 'Englishness' that resisted 'the foreign' and was 'naturally' determined by 'the landscape' and its 'traditions'.

It has been demonstrated above that the effort to represent 'Neo-Romanticism' as a coherent movement was fundamental to *A Paradise Lost*. The body of work on

display had to be seen not as disparate elements linked merely by the limited range of subject matter, or by a pervading pessimism or introspection, but as various facets of a 'movement' sharing a sense of moral and national 'purpose'. One example here may at least serve to indicate the weakness of such a claim. In the gallery 'Tooth and Claw' the animal world is seen as 'an allegory of the brute human world of violent struggle during wartime'.⁵⁸ John Craxton's *Bird among the Rocks*, 1942, and Robert Colquhoun's *Girl with Circus Goat*, 1948, were two of the works seen to express this 'unease'. Alongside these paintings were the photographs of natural history photographer Eric Hosking. His images of owls at night with their prey are represented in the exhibition as expressions of the same theme. Yet Hosking's flashlight photographs were a result of newly acquired technology and there is no evidence to suggest that his primary interest was other than extending the technical boundaries of his wildlife photography. There is also no evidence to suggest that he either associated with, or shared the concerns or preoccupations, of those other painters and illustrators. Hosking's work may serve to *illustrate* the theme of 'Tooth and Claw' but there is no reason to believe, as the gallery title implies, that he was interested in producing allegories of wartime brutality. The 'meaning' of his work, it would seem, was largely determined by its context in this exhibition.

The above example demonstrates how the work of individuals could be misrepresented at *A Paradise Lost*. It would seem that this misrepresentation was a result of the curator's primary concern to place individual artists within the broader 'vision' of a widespread 'culture'; a 'culture' that is characterised at the exhibition as 'concerned' and 'involved' with a range of issues: from ecology, to spiritual renewal and the perils of 'the modern'. There is an indication, then, that the values and ideals underlying *A Paradise Lost* fit closely with those of a broad conservative constituency discussed in the previous chapter, and represented by Peter Fuller. In order to pursue this point further it might be instructive to consider the ways in which the two exhibitions discussed so far can be said to exemplify common ideological ground.

One difference between the two exhibitions was in terms of general approach. At the Royal Academy the work was organized chronologically, perhaps as a convenient device for dividing up the large quantity and variety of art produced over almost a century. By contrast, the Barbican's thematic approach covered

only a twenty year period. Despite the substantial difference in scope, however, both exhibitions sought to articulate the relationship between 'national identity' and 'the modern'.

One reviewer claimed that the achievement of *A Paradise Lost* was that it reaffirmed a 'British tradition' marked by 'individualism' and a resistance to 'modernism':

This exhibition's triumph is to show, albeit obliquely, a consistent sensibility descended from Turner and the ways in which judicious borrowing from continental surrealism and even abstraction underlines the individuality of the British tradition.⁵⁹

These were some of the same key terms used to commend the achievements of the Royal Academy show. The narrative of each exhibition told of how 'Britishness' had endured, often despite the 'threat' of 'the modern'. Sometimes this 'threat' was represented in more general terms as 'foreign' or 'alien' ideas and theories. Sometimes it took on a specific focus: such as the Barbican exhibition's evocation of Nazi Germany as the alien 'Other', against which Neo-Romanticism defended 'British' values.

The foregoing detailed discussion of each exhibition suggests that there would be no fundamental disagreement between the curators regarding the central importance of a figurative tradition in British art. What was different, however, was the emphasis placed on particular artists. The 'Neo-Romantics', as critics at the time observed, were largely ignored in the selection at the Royal Academy where there was just one gallery entitled, 'The Spirit of the Landscape and Late Bomberg', which dealt with the 'romantic impulse' of the forties.⁶⁰ It comprised seven paintings by David Bomberg, five by Paul Nash, four by Graham Sutherland and three by Ivon Hitchens. Henry Moore, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and John Piper, the only other 'Neo-Romantics' from the Barbican exhibition included at the Royal Academy were shown in other contexts: Piper being misrepresented with only one painting, an abstract, shown in the *Unit One* gallery.⁶¹

It would appear, then, that articulations of the character of 'Britishness' and its

relationship with 'the modern' align closely in both exhibitions. Yet in each exhibition a different range of artists were selected by the curators to exemplify this 'character'. This is not necessarily contradictory, however. The Royal Academy can be regarded as a national institution from which 'the public' would expect an 'authoritative' history of twentieth century art. By very definition of the exhibition's title, work selected for this show had to appear both 'modern' and 'British'. One critic even viewed the show sceptically 'as an act of atonement' by an Academy that had otherwise been opposed to modernism throughout the century.⁶² It can be understood why work that might be characterised as 'insular', such as the British 'Neo-Romantics', was to be avoided. Yet it was just this 'insularity' that David Mellor perceived to be the strength of *A Paradise Lost*.⁶³

The term 'insular', therefore, signified different values. The curators at the Royal Academy would have considered it a negative term if it had been applied to their exhibition. By contrast the term 'insular' was embraced as a virtue at the Barbican show. Rather than signifying narrow-mindedness Mellor believed that the show provided evidence of a rich and diverse cultural movement dedicated to 'the quest'. Fuller, too, embraced this positive definition of 'insular'.⁶⁴

If the term 'conservatism' is to have any meaning in the present context it must be able to describe the underlying agreement between otherwise disparate groups, while also allowing for continuing conflict between them. *A Paradise Lost*, for example, through its focus on 'Neo-Romanticism', evoked the culture of liberal humanism, asserting the importance of individualism, freedom and the imaginative vision. At this exhibition, the ideals and values of this culture were upheld against what was perceived as the philistinism and market dominated priorities of Conservatives from the Right. Yet, despite this basic opposition to the Right, the exhibition also demonstrated an antagonism towards 'the modern'. It has been observed in this study that such attitudes to 'the modern' are a fundamental characteristic of a form of cultural conservatism which transcends party-political allegiances. Both of the exhibitions discussed in this chapter sought to demonstrate how 'Britishness' had dominated over 'the modern', and, in this sense, exemplified such cultural conservatism. Although differing in the selection of artists and the overall narrative structure of each exhibition, the curators drew upon and emphasised the art which best exemplified the strength

of 'tradition' and 'authority'.

A paradox remains: that is, how can Mellor's self-declared 'post-Modern' stance be reconciled with the seemingly conservative intentions of *A Paradise Lost*? Lyotard says that this is not surprising, but merely attests to the heterodox voices of a 'call to order':

Some are made in the name of postmodernism, others in order to combat it ... But in the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, there is an identical call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity (in the sense of *Öffentlichkeit*, of 'finding a public').⁶⁵

Habermas takes a different view, and would perhaps regard Mellor's 'post-Modernism' as a form of 'anti-Modernism':

I fear that the ideas of antimodernity, together with an additional touch of pre-modernity, are becoming popular in the circles of alternative culture ... It seems to me that there is no party in particular that monopolizes the abuse of intellectuals and the position of neo-conservatism.⁶⁶

Although their precise terms of analysis may differ, both Lyotard and Habermas appear to identify the existence of a broad-based conservatism whose characteristics resonate with those already discussed above.

Two smaller exhibitions, also held in 1987, offer a useful comparison at this point. In common with the two larger retrospectives already discussed, *Art History - Artists look at Contemporary Britain*, and *Critical Realism - Britain in the 1980s through the work of 28 artists*, both claim to represent 'Britishness'.⁶⁷ One way in which these two small exhibitions were different to the others, though, was that living artists were chosen whose work was seen to express contemporary issues and concerns.

Art History was a small exhibition staged to coincide with a retrospective of Diego Rivera at the Hayward Gallery, London. It was conceived as a

'complement' to the Rivera, as both exhibitions were seen as dealing with large scale public art expressing social awareness.⁶⁸ Helen Chadwick, Ken Currie, Peter de Francia, Paul Graham, R. B. Kitaj, Alain Miller, Keith Piper, Michael Sandle and Terry Setch were each commissioned to submit one piece of work. The organizers likened the exhibition to *60 artists for '51* in the sense that the work was on a large scale, that it referred to 'events or issues affecting contemporary life in Britain', and in anticipation that the work would subsequently be purchased for public display.⁶⁹

Richard Cork, one of the curators of the Royal Academy show, wrote an introduction in the accompanying catalogue to *Art History*. His concern for art that had 'social purpose' had already been established some years earlier.⁷⁰ He regarded the present exhibition as evidence that certain artists were engaging with 'the condition of their own nation'.⁷¹ His belief that this formed part of a continuing 'tradition' was reinforced in the catalogue by the inclusion of reproductions of work by William Hogarth, Ford Madox Brown, David Bomberg and Stanley Spencer. Cork's chosen canon shows again how curators use artists in different groupings to articulate their chosen narrative. He made one distinction between Rivera's work and that of *Art History*. The former he saw as optimistic, while the latter was marked by: 'a pervasive sense of foreboding about Britain's future'.⁷² The work at the exhibition was varied in terms of media and approach. Setch's *Touch the Earth Again*, 1987 a heavily textured mixed media panel containing fragments of figures and animals within a disintegrating landscape, was seen by Cork to express 'apprehensiveness' at the 'despoiled land'.⁷³ Miller and Piper chose images of Margaret Thatcher. In the case of Piper, says Cork, it was to express an 'impending armageddon'.⁷⁴ The charcoal drawings by Sandle and de Francia were alone in their explicit representation of violence, although the group of shadowy figures in Currie's painting imply violence.⁷⁵ Both Chadwick and Graham juxtapose photographic images. Chadwick's are seen by Cork to suggest the 'threat of dispossession',⁷⁶ while Graham's images of black workers, *Equal Opportunities*, is seen to express 'ennui'.⁷⁷ Kitaj's, *The Londonist*, 1987, is alone in not depicting a specific social issue but is seen by Cork to be a figure who represents a generalised 'rootlessness'.⁷⁸

All of the works at the exhibition employ the human figure as a means of

engaging with what were perceived as the social conditions of 'Britain' in the eighties. More explicitly focussed on 'realism' was the exhibition *Critical Realism*. Like *Art History* its concerns were seen to be part of a 'peculiarly British tradition with its roots in the social satire of Hogarth and Rowlandson'.⁷⁹ Furthermore, like *Art History*, the depiction of human figures, often in an urban environment, was seen by the curator, Brandon Taylor, as a 'direct and truthful' way of communicating 'real' social conditions.⁸⁰ In terms similar to those used by Cork in the catalogue of *Art for Society*, Taylor believed that this was achieved in the face of those other artists who 'waste time on solipsistic exercises that are only relevant to them'.⁸¹

Taylor's claim that *Critical Realism* was both a product of the eighties, and an apposite expression of the time, is rationalized in almost identical terms to those used by Mellor when he reclaimed 'Neo-Romanticism' for *A Paradise Lost*. Taylor bemoaned the effects of modernism since the sixties:

American abstract art was being heavily supported as part of the Cold War cultural effort. Pop art was on the horizon. What we now call the consumer culture was being promoted by politicians at home and by business interests abroad. Realism was becoming submerged in a tide of other concerns.⁸²

Like Mellor, Taylor also believed that the 'pluralism' of the eighties enabled the staging of exhibitions such as this: 'I interpret "Critical Realism" to encompass caricature, sculpture and photography as well as painting. The licence offered by "post-Modernist" culture has meant that any and every medium can now be used for art'.⁸³

Taylor wrote, as Mellor did, of the 'threats' of the eighties: 'soaring unemployment, rampant militarism, unrestrained over-production and social and political divisions'.⁸⁶ In the same way that Mellor proposed some coherent defence against this through the 'vision' of the 'Neo-Romantics', so too Taylor advanced the 'Realists' as a 'movement' defending human values and ideals:

The work in this exhibition ... comes from a commitment to an ideal of human life which is just, peaceful and human: a

commitment that joins people together rather than divides them, one that can potentially be understood and appreciated by all.⁸⁴

Unlike the curators of *A Paradise Lost* and *Art History*, Taylor made explicit his commitment to a radical, political art that furthered socialist principles.⁸⁵ But even so there is no evidence of any fundamental disagreement between them. Above all, it seems, the principle criterion of 'good' art was that it should defend 'human' values and ideals. For them, the best expression of these values was to be found in figurative work.

It has been seen how the evocation of 'post-modern pluralism' was used to legitimate a range of different, yet complementary, approaches and styles. The three exhibitions between them contain art covering a period of more than fifty years, yet in all cases work was selected which was believed to 'observe' or 'register' a concern to uphold and defend the human values and ideals of British society. The content and tone of the works was often deeply pessimistic. Although a range of styles and approaches was present at the exhibitions 'the figure' and 'the landscape' remained dominant 'humanist' motifs. By implication modernism was associated with, or perhaps seen as responsible for, the perceived trend of anti-humanism.

A Paradise Lost shared much in common with the conservatism of the Royal Academy exhibition because, despite its differences, it ultimately charted a specifically British tradition which was claimed to have the authority to express profound social and spiritual truths. *Art History* and *Critical Realism* were ostensibly radical through their inclusion of recent work, much of which used contemporary political references. And yet these exhibitions, too, sought to conserve a particular British tradition of 'realism' and consequently work was selected which best confirmed and continued that supposed tradition. Of these last two exhibitions, *Critical Realism* was the only product of self-avowed socialist intentions and, in keeping with earlier discussions of certain 'left art', Taylor regarded 'realism' as a necessary pre-requisite for work that was accessible to 'the people'.⁸⁶ It will be remembered that for Lyotard such altruistic intentions were no guarantee of 'truth'. Ultimately, the search for narratives which imposed some sense of 'unity' were equally untenable, whether these came from the Right or Left. Of particular importance for this present study

is the evidence that where 'unity' has been imposed in terms of some narrative of 'Britishness', it has always been at the expense of 'modernism'.

The question remains, what is the way forward? Lyotard would answer that two basic requirements are necessary: firstly, narratives claiming 'wholeness' or 'unity' should be abjured; and secondly, the concept of 'modernism' should remain vital to any post-modern undertaking. 'Modernism', for Lyotard, still defines the critical, restless and enquiring mind which is a necessary weapon against those who would domesticate art and use it to define a secure 'reality'. In the final chapter some thought will be given to such 'post-modern' strategies.

REFERENCES:

- 1 The first of these exhibitions was held between 15 January - 5 April, 1987. The second between 21 May - 19 July, 1987.
- 2 *Critical Realism*, subtitled 'Britain in the 1980s through the work of 28 artists', was a Nottingham Castle touring exhibition during 1987. In addition to Nottingham it was shown in Edinburgh, Stirling, Camden, Worcester and Winchester. *Art History*, subtitled 'Artists look at contemporary Britain' was held at the Hayward Gallery, London, 29 October 1987 - 10 January 1988.
- 3 For a discussion of Lyotard see Chapter 10, pp183-184.
- 4 Jean François Lyotard, 'Introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*', first published in 1979. Reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford, 1992), pp998-1000, p1000.
- 5 This intention is stated by Roger de Grey, President of the Royal Academy of Art, in the foreword of the exhibition catalogue.
- 6 Ibid. Work was chosen from seventy artists.
- 7 The incongruity of this was noted by some reviewers. See, for

example, Waldermar Januszczak in the *Guardian*, 15 January 1987, p10; and John Spurling in the *New Statesman*, 13 February 1987, pp26-27.

- 8 The others on the selection committee were Dr Andrew Causey (Chairman), Dawn Ades, Dr Richard Cork and Norman Rosenthal.
- 9 Frederick Gore, 'Introduction', pp9-14, p9.
- 10 Read, Ironside and Pevsner are mentioned throughout the study, although their common characteristics are discussed in the context of the Festival of Britain, Chapter8, pp127-128.
- 11 Gore, op cit.
- 12 Ibid., p10-11.
- 13 Ibid., p11.
- 14 Ibid., p11.
- 15 Ibid., p13.
- 16 Ibid., p14.
- 17 Ibid., p14.
- 18 Ibid., p14.
- 19 No author is given for this broadsheet. Three sculptures by Caro were exhibited: *Sculpture 3*, 1961; *Prairie*, 1967; and *Veduggio Sound*, 1972-3
- 20 op cit., p14.

- 21 The four galleries were: 'Three Painters of this Time' (Howard Hodgkin, R. B. Kitaj and Malcolm Morley), 'Sixties' Abstraction', 'Breaking the Boundaries', and 'The Seventies and After'.
- 22 Charles Harrison, 'The Modern, The British and The Provincial', *Artscribe*, number 62, (March/April, 1987), pp31-35.
- 23 Nash's own ambivalence towards abstraction, for example, was expressed in his 1935 essay, 'For But Not With'. This is discussed in Chapter 3, p35. The two catalogue essays referred to are: Susan Compton, 'Unit One - Towards Constructivism', from the exhibition catalogue, *op cit.*, pp214-215'; and Andrew Causey, 'Unit One - Towards Surrealism', from the exhibition catalogue, *op cit.*, pp216-217.
- 24 Susan Compton, *ibid.*, p214.
- 25 Even as the original membership of *Unit One* was disintegrating it was clear from correspondence that some of the key members wanted to reform the group with the inter-relationship of the arts remaining a central aim. Herbert Read wrote to Paul Nash on 23 November 1934: '...it seemed the real future of the Unit was a functional one - to so reconstitute yourselves that you can operate as a practical unit in the industrial system...prepared to undertake the designing of a building in every detail...' In another letter, dated 27 December 1934 Wells Coates wrote to Henry Moore encouraging him to join the Design and Industries Association. (Both of these letters can be found in the Tate Gallery Archives, 9120.102). Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth's work on *Circle* in 1935-7, attests to their continuing interest in the relationship between art and design.
- 26 Richard Cork, *op cit.*, p217.
- 27 Exhibition Gallery Guide, *op cit.*

- 28 The subject of 'What went wrong with Modernism?' is discussed in Chapter 10.
- 29 *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 1987.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Held at the Albermarle Gallery, London W1, 19 January - 13 March 1987.
- 34 John McEwen, 'Home truths about Art', *Sunday Times Magazine*, 11 January 1987, p34.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 John Spurling, 'Little boxes', *New Statesman*, 13 February 1987, pp26-27, p26.
- 37 Ibid., p27.
- 38 'British Art in the 20th Century - WASP modernism', *Art Monthly*, number 103, February 1987, pp4-6.
- 39 Ibid., p4.
- 40 Ibid., p5.
- 41 Ibid., p6.
- 42 His assertion, for example, that critics as varied as Herbert Read, Roger Fry, Frederick Gore, Richard Cork and Charles Harrison

could be reduced to the term 'English clerks' was too indiscriminate to have any meaning.

- 43 Anthony Barnett, 'The Art of Being British', *Art Monthly*, number 104, March 1987, pp 9-11.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p10.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p10.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p11. Barnett and Brighton continued to argue about this issue in the correspondence columns of *Art Monthly* until May 1987.
- 47 See Chapter 3, p23-24, for a brief discussion of Gramsci's definition of the term 'hegemony'.
- 48 Stuart Hall, in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, (London, 1988), acknowledges a debt to Gramsci.
- 49 Peter Fuller, 'Editorial', *Modern Painters*, volume 1, number 1, pp2-3, p2. For another review that similarly commented on the relationship between the two exhibitions see Marina Vaizey, 'The Quest for Paradise', *Sunday Times*, 24 May, 1987, p47.
- 50 *A Paradise Lost*, op cit., exhibition catalogue, p7.
- 51 Cecil Collins, *The Quest*, oil on canvas, 1938. This painting also appeared in the exhibition.
- 52 David Mellor, 'Editor's Preface', exhibition catalogue, op cit., p9.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p9.
- 54 This is expressed in the exhibition broadsheet, written by Mellor, where artists and photographers are shown together in a gallery

- entitled 'Recording Britain'.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 This painting by Ayrton was also his submission for the Festival of Britain's *60 for '51* exhibition.
- 57 See, for example: Marina Vaizey, 'The quest for Paradise', *Sunday Times*, 24 May, 1987, p47; and John Russell Taylor, 'Britain's own visionaries', *Times*, 2 June, 1987, p16.
- 58 From the exhibition broadsheet, op cit.
- 59 Marina Vaizey, op cit.
- 60 This gloss on the period was given by Andrew Causey, 'The Spirit of the Landscape', exhibition catalogue, op cit., p260.
- 61 John Piper's painting was *Forms on Dark Blue*, 1936.
- 62 Waldemar Januszczak, 'The best - but is it British', *Guardian*, 15 January, 1987, pp10-11.
- 63 Mellor affirmed the importance of British 'insularity' when reviewing Malcolm Yorke's book, *The Spirit of Place*. He wrote: 'Those rabid dissenters from moves to reinstate neo-romanticism have often canted on about 'insularity' as a stigmatising device: perhaps Dr Yorke is insular - insular in terms of the exclusivity of his object of study'. *Modern Painters*, volume 1, number 3, (Autumn 1988), p89-90.
- 64 See, for example, Fuller's editorial from the first issue of *Modern Painters*, (Spring, 1988), pp2-3.
- 65 Jean François Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism', first published in 1983. Reprinted in *Art in Theory*, op cit., pp1008-1015,

p1010.

- 66 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project'. This originated from an address given in 1980, and was first published under this title in 1983. Reprinted in *Art in Theory*, op cit., pp1000-1008, p1008.
- 67 For details of these exhibitions see Reference 2.
- 68 These ideas were expressed in the Hayward Gallery's publicity leaflet which gave details of both exhibitions.
- 69 Joanna Drew and Catherine Lampert, foreword to the exhibition catalogue, p3.
- 70 He was one of the organizers of *Art for Society* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1978.
- 71 *Art History*, exhibition catalogue, p5.
- 72 Ibid., p5.
- 73 Ibid., p17.
- 74 Miller, *Untitled*, 1987; Piper, *Nanny of the Nation Gathers her Flock*, 1987, *ibid.*, p13.
- 75 Sandle, *Taking Liberties/The New Jerusalem*, 1987; de Francia, 'Let us not talk of sanctions...', 1987.
- 76 Exhibition catalogue, *ibid.*, p6.
- 77 Ibid., p12.
- 78 Ibid., p7.

- 79 *Critical Realism*, exhibition catalogue, p4.
- 80 Ibid., p5.
- 81 Cork looked back to the exhibition *Art for Whom*, curated by John Berger at the Whitechapel in 1952, as proof of its continuing validity. He wrote: "Art for Whom" should be seen as a touchstone for the aspiration of every artist who refuses to settle for a function as marginal as those which dominate today.' Op cit., p49.
- 82 Exhibition catalogue, op cit., p7.
- 83 Ibid., p7. Although there were seventy five exhibits using a variety of media, there was only one sculpture: Tam Joseph, *The Struggle*, 1986.
- 84 Ibid., p24.
- 85 Ibid., p24.
- 86 See Taylor's *Modernism, Post-Modernism, Realism - A Critical Perspective for Art*, (Winchester School of Art Press, 1987) Here he argues in detail about the need to develop a 'humane socialist modernism'.

CHAPTER 14

'Modern art' and 'Britishness' - strategies of opposition and resistance.

In the exhibitions looked at so far, and particularly in the discussion of the last two, 'realism' has been an important issue. 'Realism' was represented in these exhibitions as art which best revealed the 'truth' about the 'British character' or about British social conditions. Moreover, 'figurative' art was claimed as not only the best vehicle for expressing such 'truth', but also the most 'British' way. The specific focus for this part of the discussion will be the small exhibition *Approaches to Realism*, curated by John Roberts in 1990-91.¹ It is chosen because Roberts set out to redefine the above notion of 'realism'. In a book published in the same year as the exhibition he stated his own socialist position while establishing its difference from others on the Left:

This book is essentially the product of my frustration with many of the debates prevalent on the left around the question of postmodernism and art. The technological determinism, ahistorical treatment of modernism, and general retreat from Marxism in much of this writing has produced a set of justifications - and denials - of the term which are both confused and reductive.²

An initial point to make is that, consistent with Lyotard's framing of the postmodern project, the value of 'modernism' is not rejected *tout court*. Secondly, Roberts takes 'modernism' and seeks to relate it to a redefined 'realism'. The exhibition broadsheet written by Roberts, outlined the intention to oppose the 'realism' of the AIA and John Berger. This was not to be done by rejecting figuration. What was required, he claimed was:

... the rejection of the insidious assumption, so thoroughly ingrained in the empiricist thinking of conventional realist practices as a whole, of the conflation between realism in art and the *world of appearances* [Roberts' emphasis]³

Roberts' exhibition is significant because it is representative of those on the Left

who attempted some reconciliation between Realism and Modernism by re-evaluating the work of the Frankfurt School. The school had been started in 1923 and attempted to provide a critique of Marx in the light of what was seen by its members as the changing experience of modernity. One of its leading members, Walter Benjamin, addressed the subject of aesthetics in his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Although this was written in 1934, it was not until 1968, when first translated into English, that it became widely read by those on the Left. Benjamin believed that much modern painting had been reduced to 'pure' art and had become stripped of any social function. In contrast, he saw cinema and photography as mechanically reproducible and therefore potentially more democratic. He also considered the techniques of fragmentation and collage used in photography and cinema to have provided the means for artists to represent more accurately the 'reality' of modern experience: 'Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web'.⁴

Roberts concurred with Benjamin that 'realist' art should represent the changing and often contradictory experience of modern life. But while Benjamin regarded painting unfavourably in the thirties, Roberts maintained that in the eighties it was an important medium for 'realist' work. Roberts' strategy was to try to locate his exhibition within a wider critical and theoretical context where, he believed, there had always been conflicting demands made upon the politically committed modern artist or critic. The problem remained as to how an art practice could be 'realist', while also engaging with the formal concerns of 'modernism':

In fact, it is the tension between the Brecht-Benjamin argument as an argument for ideological combativeness in art, and the Trotsky-Adorno insistence on the necessity of art's formal self-definition or self-monitoring - in effect the modernist legacy - that lies at the heart of this exhibition.⁵

Roberts believed that it was in painting that this tension was best demonstrated - he therefore chose artists who worked primarily in this medium, and who, in his view, were developing critical practices which confronted the difficulties of 'realism'. They were Rasheed Araeen, Art and Language, Sue Atkinson, Terry

Roberts claimed that in *Approaches to Realism*, the artists self consciously 'referred' to the formal concerns of modernism often for the purpose of parody or irony. His understanding of Rasheed Araeen's *Green Painting*, 1985-86, illustrates this claim. The work consisted of five photographs of the Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Azha. They were arranged to form a cross against a background of green rectangles. Roberts wrote of this work:

By organizing signs of the 'primitive' (bloody ritual) within the framework of Western modernity (the minimalist art grid) he establishes a set of critical relations and contrasts between cultural imperialism and cultural autonomy, modernism and tradition, that dialecticise the relationship between east and west.⁶

Roberts concluded that 'The realism of the work ... lies in its capacity to reveal contradiction and invert identities through the artist's, and our, shared capacity to read one thing as another.'⁷ Roberts also claimed that the 'realism' of the paintings being exhibited could not be simply reduced to the 'meaning' that could be read out of such references: the paintings also possessed aesthetic qualities. The issue of 'realism' was therefore seen by him as the 'conflict between...aesthetic autonomy and use-value'.⁸

Regarding the question of 'realism', however, the exhibition was not without its problems. David Batchelor, one of the artists involved, commented: 'The realism of some work was quite fundamentally opposed to the realism of other work. It was contradictory, and I didn't really feel these problems were addressed'.⁹ Rasheed Araeen, made a similar comment. He found that he had respect for, but little empathy with the 'realism' of a fellow exhibitor, Sonia Boyce. She employed what Araeen referred to as a 'traditional' figurative approach, representing issues of black identity and white repression and oppression, but, he commented: 'I think [she is] caught up in the initial rhetoric ... I think there is a problem when art begins to involve guilt and sentiment'.¹⁰ There were clearly issues left unresolved at this exhibition, but it could be argued, as Lyotard might, that resolution and coherence were impossibilities anyway. *Approaches to*

Realism is not necessarily the best example of an exhibition in the eighties which has tried to chart a different approach to 'realism' and 'modernism', but it stands as a fitting example. The importance of *Approaches to Realism*, as suggested above, lay in the way it demonstrated the possibility of redefining 'realism' by contesting its relationship with 'figuration'. It could also be argued that by choosing artists who continued to engage with the tensions and ambiguities of the modernist legacy, the exhibition refused any simple concern for 'Britishness'.

There is one final exhibition that should be considered as a complement to *Approaches to Realism*. It was called *The Other Story - Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain*, and opened at the Hayward Gallery in 1989.¹¹ Its curator was Rasheed Araeen, one of the artists who exhibited at *Approaches to Realism*. Apart from being a practising artist and curator, Araeen is also a writer and activist. In 1987 he founded *Third Text* to raise the intellectual debate concerning those modern, non-European artists marginalized by mainstream modernism. To press forward from many fronts, as Araeen does, in order to disturb and unsettle the institutionalized claims on 'modernism' would seem to be a valuable strategy. Both *Approaches to Realism* and *The Other Story* exemplified the same belief that the aesthetic conservatism of the eighties could only be contested by continuing to look to 'modernism' for the necessary resources to develop a critical art practice in the nineties. For Araeen, *The Other Story* also had a more specific intention. It was an explicit rejection of 'the dominant ideology of an imperial civilization for which the racial or cultural difference of the colonized constitutes Otherness'.¹²

If post-modernism is defined as a period, and as one when the constraints imposed by the modernist paradigm were loosened or challenged, then *The Other Story* is an apposite example of a timely critical intervention. It is clear from the quotation above that Araeen's objective was to bring in from the margins the work of non-European artists whom he considered to have been excluded from the mainstream history of modern art. He made it clear that by asserting the 'Otherness' of Afro-Asian artists the exhibition was not inviting the celebration of an 'exotic' alternative to the modernist paradigm:

It is ... a story of those men and women who defied their

'otherness' and entered the modern space that was forbidden to them, not only to declare their historic claim on it but also to challenge the framework which defined and protected its boundaries.¹³

Araeen saw the purpose of *The Other Story* as a necessary polemic. He wanted to challenge the modernist paradigm of the artist as 'white, male, individual, [and] heroic.', and, 'interrogate the nature of its narrative; to reveal the underlying myth which disguises those contradictions inherent in its claim of objective superiority, both historical and epistemological.'¹⁴ But Araeen's intention was not to reject modernism:

I think the basic issue of how to intervene, how to rupture the purity of modernism for me is still very important. When I say purity, the notion of purity I am referring to is very much to do with the identity of the white man. I think this is something that has to be constantly questioned.¹⁵

The Other Story consisted of over 200 works from 24 artists covering a wide variety of media in both two- and three-dimensions. There were four chronological sections to the show. 'In the Citadel of Modernism' included figurative sculpture by Ronald Moody and paintings of people and landscapes by Avinash Chandra and Ivan Peries, as well as abstract work. 'Taking the Bull by the Horns' contained conceptual work, by Araeen himself amongst others. 'Confronting the System' was the most overtly political of the sections. And finally 'Recovering Cultural Metaphors' focussed on 'the way artists have responded not only to the desire of the dominant culture for cultural difference but also to the re-articulation of the prevailing forms and values'.¹⁶

Araeen acknowledged that the rationale underlying *The Other Story* was founded on only a partial understanding of the complex social and cultural conditions that existed in post-war Britain.¹⁷ Notwithstanding this qualification his project can be seen as an attempt to insert the issue of race into the debate over 'modernism' and 'Britishness' in the eighties. The staging of the exhibition highlights some pertinent problems and tensions.

Firstly, Araeen has drawn attention to the practical difficulty of organizing the exhibition. He wrote of what he considered to be an untenable situation during the seventies:

In the 1950s and early 1960s there was some recognition of non-European artists, but in the following twenty years there was not a single exhibition, national or international, small or big, which included any Afro-Asian artist.¹⁸

He approached the Arts Council in 1978 for a research grant to rectify the situation. It was rejected then, and again in 1982. He approached the GLC in 1984, again with no success. In 1986 the Arts Council agreed to his proposal for an exhibition of Afro-Asian art.¹⁹ Araeen recorded that he felt only a limited sense of satisfaction at this. He believed that the Art Council's support was symptomatic of a changing attitude by 'the establishment' towards Afro-Asian art. The availability of funds to promote 'ethnic minority arts' at this time, he felt, was one of the government's strategies for addressing growing racial tension and unrest. Yet he remained sceptical about the extent of this support: '...it was not a simple and straightforward struggle, neither was "The Other Story" exhibition a result of a fundamental change in the art community as a whole.'²⁰

Critical reviews of *The Other Story* also highlighted some of the difficulties of Araeen's project. Araeen addressed the accusation that the art in the exhibition was 'derivative' claiming that it was common for Western modern artists to 'inspire' and 'influence' each other while non-European artists were excluded from this 'framework'.²¹ Araeen believed that often it was not the *quality* of Afro-Asian work that was really the issue for critics, but their conviction that Afro-Asians should be looking to their 'own' culture. He concluded that: 'Many Afro-Asian artists have defied this framework, and it seems that this is seen as a threat to the traditional and prevailing idea of 'Britishness'.²²

Araeen was drawing attention here to the difficulty Afro-Asian artists have in penetrating what he perceived to be a closed system. One reviewer, for example, accused him of representing an 'élitist black intelligentsia'.²³ Such artists, the writer continued, 'are feeding off mainstream modernism rather than tapping into the essential life force of black immigrant culture ... Yet it is a far cry

from the raw energy in rap, house and street culture, which have become vehicles for political activism'.²⁴ Modern artists are frequently berated for 'elitism', but here the criticism takes on a further inflexion: 'black' artists, it is asserted, would do better to engage with their 'roots' by exploiting the accessibility of 'popular' culture. This was a call to assert an 'Otherness' that Araeen had so resolutely resisted and it gave little support to his demand that Afro-Asian artists should be admitted equally into the discourses of modern art.

It is not the intention here to arbitrate on the above criticisms of *The Other Story* - they are included to demonstrate the complex of issues concerning 'modernism' and 'Britishness' which the exhibition managed to raise. Furthermore, the examples serve to show how, by contrast, the issue of 'race' was entirely absent from the narrative of 'Britishness' at the Royal Academy. It is indicative that the Royal Academy's retrospective contained no work at all by Afro-Asian artists.

One further point concerning the staging of *The Other Story* was Araeen's perception that the exhibition had been 'allowed' by a 'post-modern' liberal intelligentsia who were sympathetic to Afro-Asians.²⁵ Despite this support he continued to question the extent to which things had really changed:

It seems that we can only enter the British, or Western for that matter, space on the basis of its benevolence, keeping a distance between the Host and Guest. We should not claim or demand an active or critical role within it and a place in its history.²⁶

This assertion of Araeen's can be examined in the light of the discussion above of exhibitions held during the late eighties. It has been seen how conditions existed at this time which legitimated a 'space' for Afro-Asian artists to produce a critique of 'Britishness' through *The Other Story*. As Araeen said, the purpose of the exhibition was to engage with the critical concerns of modernism and draw attention to its closures. Similarly *British Art in the 20th Century* and *A Paradise Lost* arose from the same critical debates over modernism and 'Britishness', although they represented interventions of a different kind. In contrast to *The Other Story* 'modernism' in these exhibitions was not so much engaged with as negotiated and incorporated into a narrative of 'Britishness' that was

fundamentally conservative in character. This emphasis on the continuation of a perceived 'national tradition' represented 'Britishness' in a way that was antagonistic to both the work and the ideas of *The Other Story*. There is, perhaps, some weight behind Araeen's claim that an unequal relationship continued to exist in the contest over prevailing ideas and values. 'Guest' cultures remained marginalized or excluded from critical interventions into 'the modern' and 'national identity' by the authoritative and confident 'voices' of a dominant 'host' culture.

Araeen's focus on the relative 'authority' of contesting 'voices' raises the issue of relative power. Bearing in mind the cultural authority invested in the Royal Academy, their power to legitimate a particular narrative of 'Britishness' cannot be overlooked. Terry Eagleton's analysis of the power effected by literary institutions when they confer canonical status on certain writers and works is also pertinent to this discussion of art institutions. It is especially relevant to the way that individuals or works are positioned centrally, marginally, or excluded entirely, from critical discourses:

Regional dialects of the discourse, so to speak, are acknowledged and sometimes tolerated, but you must not sound as though you are speaking another language altogether. To do so is to recognize in the sharpest way that critical discourse is power. To be on the inside of the discourse itself is to be blind to this power, for what is more natural and non-dominative than to speak one's own tongue.²⁷

Looked at in these terms, the narrative underlying the Royal Academy exhibition can be seen to exemplify an influential discourse of 'Britishness'. To be on the inside, as Eagleton claims, is to see it as perfectly 'natural'; to be marginalized or excluded is to become aware of the exercise of power.

It has already been demonstrated how the critical positions underlying each exhibition suggest that there were points of both conflict and consensus between them. The complexity of this relationship is also apparent from the 'placing' of the same artists in several exhibitions, each with a different curatorial emphasis. Yet a more fundamental tension can be observed. *British Art in the 20th*

Century, *A Paradise Lost*, *Art History*, and *Critical Realism* all represent different facets of a broad-based cultural conservatism and a primary emphasis on an innate 'British tradition'. *Approaches to Realism* and *The Other Story*, in contrast, contest concepts such as the 'realist tradition' and 'Britishness'. The first group of exhibitions exemplify those for whom 'modernism' was something to be accommodated or opposed. For those exemplified by the latter group 'modernism' was something which still served as a critical resource that seemed to provide the only means of resisting parochialism.

One reviewer wrote of *The Other Story* that: 'This exhibition is at times sensuous, iconoclastic, meditative and playful. But there is indeed little unity here'.²⁸ It is interesting that the one quality that this reviewer found lacking at the exhibition - unity - was arguably irrelevant to its aims. These may be seen as consistent with Lyotard's recommendation that concepts of 'wholeness' and 'unity' should be resisted. Similarly, it was observed earlier that Robert's exhibition was seen by some as unresolved and problematic. To generalise from this, perhaps it is precisely the tentative and provisional nature of these exhibitions which provided them with the necessary critical edge to challenge the assurance of dominant narratives of 'Britishness' and 'Modernism'. Perhaps these exhibitions can be claimed as exemplary of a certain kind of 'post-modern' practice, although a distinction needs to be drawn between them and other 'post-modern' practices. Rasheed Araeen expressed concern over certain aspects of post-modernism with respect to Afro-Asian artists:

I am not really comfortable with post-modern theories ... It is a denial of authorship and history. For us who have been denied that position in the historical process authorship and history are important.²⁹

Araeen also found the 'post-modern' use of irony problematic:

What seems to be irony is not irony. Irony can be a tool of critical discourse. But it is a question of what you are being ironic about. If you are ironic about everything you become a cynic.³⁰

This may appear to contradict Roberts' earlier claim that Araeen and the other artists at *Attitudes to Realism* had frequently used irony. It is revealing, though, that Araeen does not reject the use of irony: indeed he endorses it as a legitimate tool of 'critical discourse'. What he does reject, however, is the way it is deployed within certain 'post-modern' practices. If he felt no sympathy with the above aspects of 'post-modernism', the question remains - what other 'post-modern' strategy is left? One characteristic of this strategy, as already mentioned, involves the retention and reworking of modernism, in the belief that the concept of 'aesthetic experience' is worth preserving. But this would not be to claim that such experience has an immutable or timeless quality. It is rather to assert that art has the means to represent experience and provoke critical awareness in a particularly distinct and powerful way. 'Aesthetic experience' so defined, therefore, is something that has constantly to be remade and reworked in the face of a changing world. It was a belief in the value of reworking the formal concerns of modernism in constant tension with the 'reality' of changing social conditions that provided the impetus for *Approaches to Realism*.

In the context of this present study *The Other Story* and *Approaches to Realism* can be taken as tokens of resistance to a deeply entrenched conservative tendency in British society which was evident during the eighties. Similar resistance and opposition in Britain has been witnessed during other periods covered by this study. In the thirties, for example, *Unit One* briefly staked a claim for a renewed modern art practice, and in the fifties Laurence Alloway maintained a critical focus on the work of abstract artists and 'pop' artists. In the sixties and seventies 'minimal' and 'conceptual' artists challenged what was perceived as a rigid modernist dogma. This is not to suggest that they were all equally 'successful', but to indicate how these different practices continued to engage with the issues of modernism.

Throughout this study it has been observed how those seeking to identify what is 'innately British' have often defined this in terms of what is 'permanent' or 'durable'. These ideals and values would seem to contradict the often iconoclastic intentions of much modern art. Yet, despite this apparent incompatibility between the two concepts there has been sufficient evidence to demonstrate how important modern art has been for those who have sought to endorse 'Britishness'. One reason for this would seem to be that modern art

remains for many a potent symbol of 'British' values such as 'individualism' and 'freedom'. Another is that modern art performs the function of revivifying or updating a 'British' concern for 'the landscape' or the 'human condition'.

It has been a recurring pattern in this study that whenever modern art is articulated within a discourse of 'Britishness' it is invariably used to confirm and consolidate the integrity of a national 'tradition'. Modern art in such a discourse is thus robbed of its power to question or challenge. The evidence from the present chapter would suggest that at the end of the eighties modernism is not yet bereft of the necessary resources to fund a critical practice which will continue to resist such ideological incorporation.

REFERENCES:

- 1 The exhibition was organized by the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, Darlington Arts Centre and Oldham Art Gallery, where it toured between 7 April - 15 December 1990. It was subsequently shown at the Goldsmiths' College, University of London, 10 January - 6 February 1991.
- 2 John Roberts, from the preface to *Postmodernism, politics and art*, (Manchester University, 1990).
- 3 From the exhibition broadsheet, *Approaches to Realism*, p2.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990 - An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, 1992), pp512-520, p516.
- 5 *Approaches to Realism*, op cit., p6.
- 6 Ibid., p9.
- 7 Ibid., p9.

- 8 Ibid., p8. Roberts belief that 'aesthetic autonomy' remained an important, if problematic, aspect of painting providing some defence against those who raised the objection that he was proposing a 'closed system' in which artists possessed 'a high degree of self-consciousness towards one's means of production and towards one's place in history'. (John Cornell, 'Postmodernism, politics, and art', *Art Monthly*, number 137, June 1990, pp25-26).
- 9 From the transcript of a conversation with David Batchelor, 11 December, 1994. See Appendix 6, p335.
- 10 From the transcript of a conversation with Rasheed Araeen, 4 February, 1995, Appendix 7, p346.
- 11 This was held at the Hayward Gallery, London, 29 November 1989 - 4 February 1990 and travelled to Wolverhampton and Manchester.
- 12 Rasheed Araeen, 'Introduction: when chickens come home to roost', from the exhibition catalogue, *The Other Story...*, *ibid.*, p9.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p9.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p11.
- 15 From the transcript of a conversation with the artist, *op cit.*, p346.
- 16 From the exhibition catalogue, *The Other Story*, *ibid.*, p83.
- 17 Rasheed Araeen, 'Modernism, History and Others: Why are Non-European Artists Invisible in Modern Discourse or History?'. This essay appeared in the *Bulletin of the Archives and Documentation Centers for Modern and Contemporary Art*,

(A/CARC), published under the Auspices of the 'International Association of Art Critics', volumes 1&2, 1991, pp43-46.

18 Ibid., p44.

19 This is detailed in *ibid.*, pp44-45.

20 *Ibid.*, p45. He also drew attention to the career of the Asian-born sculptor, Anish Kapoor. While he did not question Kapoor's high regard as an artist, he wondered if 'the establishment' had not used his success 'both implicitly and explicitly, to counter the debate around racism in art'.

21 *Ibid.*, p46.

22 *Ibid.*, p46.

23 Petrine Archer-Straw, 'The Other Story', *Art Monthly*, number 133, (February 1990), pp14-16, p16.

24 *Ibid.*, p16.

25 See Rasheed Araeen, exhibition catalogue, *op cit.*, p12. Perhaps exemplifying this was an article that appeared in *Modern Painters* at the time of the exhibition, by the Labour Party's Shadow Minister for the Arts and Media, Mark Fisher, (Volume 2, number 4, Winter 1989/90, pp77-78). Although placed in the 'Exhibition Reviews' section it read more as a statement of Labour party policy concerning 'minority cultures'.

26 Rasheed Araeen, 'Modernism, History and Others...' *op cit.*, p46.

27 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory - an introduction*, (Oxford, 1983), p203.

28 Nancee Oku Bright, 'Black magic and the other world', *Times*

Higher Education Supplement, 15 December, 1989, p16a.

- 29 Transcript of conversation with Rasheed Araeen op cit., p345.
- 30 Ibid., p345.

APPENDIXES

The character and audience of *The Studio*, 1930-35.

The Studio is important during this period for the testimony it provides of how the discursive character of a publication constructed over a period of time and in a variety of ways, both 'the modern' and its relation to national 'tradition'. Three aspects of *The Studio* will be used to discuss its ideological position. This position cannot be regarded as a simple exposition of conservatism, but is further evidence of the complex negotiation of values and ideals. They are: the journal's stated aims and objectives; the way these are articulated; and how 'the modern' is 'framed' by the journal.

In the introduction to the first twenty-one volumes, published in 1923, there was some reflection on the journal's original aims which had appeared in the first issue published in April 1893. It was declared that *The Studio's* original and enduring ambition to embrace the 'New Criticism' of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism represented:

...the radial centre of the new movements in the modern arts. Its purpose was to be a firm supporter of every fresh and honest effort to get away from the curse of plagiarism in domestic architecture, from the curse of effete ideals in painting and in sculpture, and from the slavery of imitative repetitions in design and handicraft. This was an aim worth fighting for, and *The Studio* has never been false to its mottoes - "Use and Beauty", "The Age we live in and its artistic needs and aspirations".¹

Such a claim indicated a genuine wish to engage with certain aspects of 'the modern', particularly in the applied arts; although the acceptable limits of new and innovative work are drawn out in the motto 'Use and Beauty'. This injunction for artists to give priority to utility, and to supply the 'needs' of 'the Age', remained the crucial test for modern art in *The Studio*, and underpinned their debates of the thirties.

In 1933, when the journal was in its fortieth year, an editorial appeared which again commemorated its 'pioneer work'.² The concern about certain modern art expressed earlier was again taken up and the priority of 'usefulness' reiterated:

'...the twentieth century development in the arts is twofold - consisting first of those which are of direct and practical use to the community, and of those which are either experimental or useless'.³ *The Studio* now more sharply defined its role as one of mediation between an often 'perplexed and irritated' public and the modern artist: 'It has the difficult task of discriminating, of tempering violence or zeal with moderation'.⁴ Modern art was seen, in part, to reflect a prevailing malaise in society at large: 'Painting has become associated with the horror of Flanders, where the landscape was transmuted by shell-fire into a mournful synthesis; with the fretful license of a post-war generation, seeking artificial excitement in a return to the stimulus of barbarism; with decay and with revolution'.⁵

It is these broad aims which can be seen to articulate the contents of *The Studio*. Over the period 1930-35 the overall balance of articles remained consistent. These can be divided into two categories: those dealing with aspects of art and design, with an emphasis on connoisseurship; and those of a more theoretical kind. It is not surprising, given the journal's overall intentions, that in the first of these two categories there should be an emphasis on 'applied art': frequently dealing with architecture, interior design, jewellery and furniture. This emphasis on utility and function can be seen to inform the articles on art and artists as well: landscape, portrait and still-life were usually the preferred genres, although there was some inclusion of abstract work. Overall the requirement was that works of art should be useful as saleable items.⁶ Attention to the needs of collectors was, at times, clearly focussed. For example, February 1934 saw the first of a regular series 'Artists and Pictures', by Douglas Goldring. Introduced as 'A monthly causerie on events, exhibitions and personalities of the London Art World', it provided a genial guide for collectors.⁷ Again, in the same year, under the editorial 'The Use of Pictures', a whole issue was dedicated to collecting.⁸

One further aim of *The Studio* was a commitment to 'all fresh forms of good modern art-work, whether foreign or British'.⁹ This 'international' role was seen to originate from the interests of the founder of the journal, Charles Holme.¹⁰ By 1923 a French edition of *The Studio* was being published, supplemented by a French translation and, in April 1931, the American edition began publication under the title *Atelier*. Articles regularly dealt with art and design from America, frequently dealing with artists who worked in a 'Realist' style informed by

modern European developments. America was particularly admired by *The Studio* as a 'great country', and one editorial commented: 'There is perhaps no country so appreciative and so quickly receptive of new ideas in the arts as America'.¹¹

In April 1933 an occasional series began which focussed in each issue on art, craft and design from different countries. By 1935 Poland, Austria, South Africa, Britain and Sweden had been covered by articles which reflected the journal's emphasis on modern art and design, along with a country's traditional 'folk' art and craft. The criterion of 'usefulness' was applied to the first of these and good design from abroad was openly embraced and encouraged, sometimes in order to admonish what was viewed as the dilatory attitude of British artists and industry to design matters.¹² The 'usefulness' of art and craft was established through their representation as collector's items for the connoisseur who demonstrated a 'taste' for the exotic and 'un-English'.

The Studio's pledge to engage with theoretical issues was articulated through both editorials and general articles. The two main themes were: the development of 'design' in Britain, and 'modern art', with 'national identity' central to both. In addition to the general articles, 'design' was frequently taken up as a campaigning issue, and the government and industry were berated for a lack of vision in supporting and encouraging good British design.¹³ In 1933 an editorial appeared entitled: 'The National endorses *The Studio's* foresight - Lord Gorrell's committee adopts *The Studio's* ideas and policy'.¹⁴ Here, the journal's authority was believed to be vindicated and its role as a cultural leader assured. In 1934 *The Studio* lent support to the Prince of Wales' speech urging for 'recognition of the Artist in Industry',¹⁵ and in 1935 C G Holme, the editor, was on the Executive and Planning Committees of 'The Exhibition of British Art in Industry', held at the Royal Academy.¹⁶ Such articles and editorials regularly appeared in the period under discussion, and *The Studio* remained committed to what it considered to be the need to modernize attitudes to British design.

'Modern art', the second theoretical theme dealt with by *The Studio*, was also held up against the criterion of 'usefulness', and there was a pervasive mood that some 'modern art' was responsible for destroying proven values and national differences. These values and concerns were articulated through two different

types of article: the polemical essay, which appeared as a discrete contribution or one of a series; and the editorial, often providing the over-arching view for a series.

Typical of an individual contribution was 'Picasso and the cul-de-sac of modern painting', by William Gaunt, published in 1931.¹⁷ Here he praised the artist for his innovation and ability to express 'The threads of modern life'.¹⁸ Overall, however, Gaunt concluded that Picasso's influences on painting '...has actually been malign', and that 'Picasso the Liberator has also been Picasso the Destroyer'.¹⁹ A situation is now believed to prevail where 'Except among the artisans of art, the hardy perennials of the academics, there is no standard left of "correct" drawing, no approved method of painting. There is not even any valid criticism if painting is anything you like to think it is'.²⁰ A later article 'The tragic position of Abstract Art', by George Saiko, again perceived 'modern art', here equated with cubism, to typify the destruction of cherished 'standards' and values in society at large: 'The present age has no unified philosophical or religious ideology, it is lacking in a system of values manifested in cultural forms; and to be the expression of such a system is the basic fact for the nature and the effectiveness of all art'.²¹

In numerous editorials, some written as an introduction to a series, *The Studio* claimed for itself an open-minded attitude to 'modern art' and viewed itself as the forum for debate.²² It became apparent, however, that *The Studio* did not remain impartial but continued to claim 'usefulness' as the criterion for what was worthwhile. 'Modern art' which failed to fulfil this criterion was open to scepticism or criticism. This was apparent not so much by diatribe but by the way articles were 'framed' by the editorial activity which selected the overall 'balance' of articles within and between editions. Through a developing discourse values were established and reinforced. An example of this can be seen by using as a starting-point an issue of *The Studio* from 1933 where two articles appeared in succession: one by William Gaunt, the other by Edward Wadsworth.²³ Gaunt was represented as a critic who merely 'propounds questions' about modern art, and although his essay was ostensibly non-partisan, any reader who had followed previous essays by Gaunt would recognize his tone as one of scepticism over some of the developments in 'abstraction'.²⁴ Wadsworth's essay appeared under the heading: 'The Abstract Painter's own

explanation'. The editorial introduction suggested that this artist: '...claims that our eyes are not yet trained to the same degree as our ears, and that to appreciate the abstract picture demands control and training of the eye'. This attributes to Wadsworth an elitist tone that is in contrast to Gaunt's populist appeal to the 'intelligent layman'.²⁵

These two essays, already exhibiting differences, can also be seen as ideologically 'positioned' by their relationship to other articles. In the same edition, for example, the preceding article featured the sculptor and Royal Academician, Sargeant Jagger.²⁶ The title: 'The sculptor's point of view', so closely resembled Wadsworth's that it invited some comparison from the reader, particularly as Jagger's academic naturalism and strongly conservative opinion were in contrast to Wadsworth's. Jagger's dislike for 'abstract' sculpture was vehemently expressed: he talked of the 'worship of ugliness today', and of 'modern' sculptors as 'impudent profaners of beauty, these insulters of sacred things, these prostitutes of art...'²⁷

Although some readers might have empathized with Jagger's denunciation, *The Studio* editorials rarely used such emotive terms to repudiate certain forms of 'modern art'. Often the tastes and preferences upheld by *The Studio* were expressed in a more subtle way, through the ordering of articles, or the selection of reproductions. Alongside the essay by Gaunt, for example, was a photograph of a sculpture by Hepworth and a painting by Nicholson, as if to represent the 'extremes' of 'modern art'. The caption accompanying the latter referred the reader back to a previous edition where these two artists, in response to a series of questions: 'expressed their attitudes towards art...'²⁸ Nicholson was asked questions such as: 'If faithful representation is not the standard, by what standard are we to judge?'; and 'What is your aim? Does this modern point of view entail the destruction of all previous painting?'²⁹ As with Gaunt's article, although ostensibly non-partisan, the regular reader would be aware that questions like this articulated all of *The Studio's* concerns regarding art that was elitist, 'alien' and seemingly contemptuous of 'tradition': a position they elucidated extensively in a series of editorials earlier the same year.³⁰ Nicholson's reply to the last question of the article: 'What is the use of modern pictures of this kind? What place do they fill in modern life?', was 'Modern painting in modern life has the same place and use as contemporary painting has always had and always will

have in contemporary life - it is an inherent part of its vitality'.³¹ Such a reply would have seemed fugitive in the light of *The Studio's* concern over utilitarian purpose, and confirmed their belief in the questionable value of the sort of art exemplified by Nicholson.

Having looked at how the stated editorial aims and objectives of *The Studio* underpinned the articulation of articles some final consideration can be given to the question of where *The Studio* can be 'placed' within the ideological groupings ranging from 'cultural conservatives' through to the 'avant-garde'.

The Studio gains some credibility for its claim to be a 'cultural leader' by its preparedness to engage with the issues of 'the modern' rather than by demonstrating a reactionary effort to reject them out of hand. Yet this 'cultural leadership' was exercised not by embracing all that was new but by redefining what was, or was not, acceptable. *The Studio's* interest in art and design from around the world, supported their claim to embrace 'international' work, and avoided any accusation of insularity in outlook. There was little sympathy, it seemed, for the 'Internationalism' of modern artists such as Moore, Hepworth and Nicholson. In 'What is wrong with Modern Painting?', the cosmopolitanism of these artists became a target: 'There is far too much internationalism in modern painting...The denationalized painter accepts ideas without thinking for himself...'³² Generally, an anxiety was expressed that British art was in danger of being swamped by what was 'alien'.

Again, *The Studio* engaged with the new and the innovative, yet this did not imply any particular empathy with the avant-garde, but demonstrated its own inflection of 'the modern' based on the criterion of 'usefulness': 'We put forward, in opposition to the anaemic Bloomsbury theory, the idea that painting has a place in modern life, that it should enter into a more direct relation with it, and that pictures are meant to be seen and enjoyed, and in this sense "used" by as many people s possible.'³³ This declaration, although ostensibly establishing the simple equation that 'use' equals 'enjoyment', concealed a deeper anxiety: the prosaic, but vital issue of market value. An editorial in 1934 commented: 'Another disturbing factor to many people was the great upheaval of values. The pictures they had once liked, depreciated. New and controversial forms of painting soared (and fluctuated) in price. Security of investment and certainty of

merit seemed alike difficult to find.'³⁴

In identifying a modern artist who satisfied *The Studio's* criteria for work that was both 'national' in outlook and subject matter; and which was 'useful', either for the collector, or as an item of applied art, Paul Nash would appear to be the embodiment. These qualities are attributed to Nash in an article by William Gaunt, whose scepticism of abstract art has already been discussed. It appeared in the same edition as the interview with Hepworth and Nicholson, where, by juxtaposition, the journal indicated for the reader both the 'useful' and the 'useless'.³⁵ By 1934, however, abstract art had found some conditional acceptance as the appropriate complement to the modern interior.³⁶ Yet the more radical aims of Nicholson or Hepworth, to transform society, were defused by an emphasis on 'decoration'.

Alongside *The Studio's* articulation of 'the modern' was consistent support for what was 'traditional' and the 'conservative'. This was reflected in the amount of space given to reviews of exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Art, and to artists who were members of the Academy. While at times the Academy was chided for the degree of its conservatism, much was said to commend it for its cultural leadership and efforts were made to explain to the readership the importance of its function.³⁷

The Studio's strategy, then, was to proceed with caution. Its appeal was to the professional, academic artist; to the collector and connoisseur; and to the 'intelligent layman'. The common factor linking these groups was their interest in 'modernizing' art, and it was here that *The Studio* intervened and located itself as a 'leader'. This is essentially a conservative position, where 'modernization' required an updating of styles and techniques, but also sought to maintain the existing hierarchies and structures of power based among 'traditional' bodies, such as the Royal Academy, and among established groups of professional artists. This conservatism was tempered by a pragmatism which acknowledged that change was necessary for survival. 'Abstract art' however, epitomized by Nicholson and Hepworth, connoted all those aspects of modern art which appeared to them to threaten the existing stable order of 'traditionally' accepted forms of practice and centres of authority.

REFERENCES:

- 1 'The work of *The Studio* as reviewed upon the completion of the twenty-first volume', 1923, p7. A discussion of the 'Old and New Criticism' appears on p6.
- 2 'Art History in the Making - the pioneer work of *The Studio* - for forty years the world's Art Magazine', G C Holme (Editor), *The Studio*, volume 105 (1993), pp207-210.
- 3 Ibid., p210.
- 4 Ibid., p208.
- 5 Ibid., p208.
- 6 See 'The Younger School of Painting - Great Britain', *The Studio*, volume 104 (1932), pp3-11. Here, the range of artists covered was: J D Ferguson, Winifred Nicholson, Edward Wadsworth, Reginald Brill, Dod Proctor, Richard Wyndham, John Aldridge, Graham Murray, Matthew Smith, Vanessa Bell, Cedric Morris, Duncan Grant, E Kirk, C R W Nevinson, Edward Wolfe, Mark Gertler, Henri du Plessis, Morland Lewis, and Paul Nash. Landscape, portrait and still-life predominate, and artists are urged to take cognizance of society's needs: 'It would be better if we knew more about them [the artists] and if they worked "at a job" more in the customary sense in which that popular phrase is understood', p11.
- 7 Douglas Goldring, 'Artists and Pictures', *The Studio*, volume 107 (1934), pp100-103.
- 8 *The Studio*, volume 107 (September, 1934).
- 9 'The work of *The Studio* as reviewed upon the completion of the

twenty-first volume, op cit., p7.

- 10 See, for example, Sir John Martin Harvey, 'An Impression of Charles Holmes', *The Studio*, volume 105 (1933), p215.
- 11 *The Studio*, editorial 'Link between Europe and America', volume 104, 1932, p127.
- 12 See, for example, the issue dealing with the 'International Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Art', held in Monza, Italy, volume 100 (1930).
- 13 See the editorial 'Where there is no vision people perish', *The Studio*, volume 100 (June, 1930).
- 14 *The Studio*, volume 105 (1933), pp71-73.
- 15 See 'The Prince of Wales calls for the recognition of the Artist in Industry', volume 107 (1934), pp3-4.
- 16 For C G Holme's personal view of the exhibition, see his review: 'British Art in Industry', *The Studio*, volume 109 (1935), pp55-69.
- 17 William Gaunt, 'Picasso and the cul-de-sac of modern painting', *The Studio*, volume 101 (1931), pp408-415.
- 18 Ibid., p412.
- 19 Ibid., p412.
- 20 Ibid., p412.
- 21 George Saiko, 'The tragic position of Abstract Art', *The Studio*, volume 105 (1933), pp43-48.

- 22 See, for example, editorials such as 'What is wrong with Modern Painting?', volume 103 (1931), p63; 'Progress in Modern Painting', volume 104 (1932), pp32-33; and 'Is the Painter in touch with life?', volume 109 (1935), p295.
- 23 William Gaunt, 'In Search of the Absolute', pp271-273; and Edward Wadsworth's 'The Abstract Painter's own explanation', pp274-276. Both from *The Studio*, volume 106 (1933). Subsequently correspondence was printed in volume 106 (1934), pp45-46 and pp109-110.
- 24 See footnote 17.
- 25 Gaunt, 'In Search of the Absolute', op cit., p271.
- 26 op cit., p274.
- 27 Sargeant Jagger, 'The Sculptor's point of view', *The Studio*, volume 106, (November), pp251-254, p254.
- 28 The article referred to is: 'The aim of the modern artist', *The Studio*, volume 104 (1932), pp332-333.
- 29 Ibid., p333.
- 30 'What is wrong with Modern Painting?', *The Studio*, volume 103 (1932). There were five articles in all, running between the months January-June: 'Internationalism', pp63-64; 'The pernicious influence of words', pp164-165; 'The superiority complex', pp183-184; 'False Economics', pp247-248; 'Evolution', pp324-325.
- 31 op cit., p333.
- 32 'What is wrong with modern art?', op cit., p63.

- 33 'Progress in Modern Painting', volume 104 (1932), p32.
- 34 *The Studio*, volume 108, September 1934, p107.
- 35 William Gaunt, 'Paul Nash, the main and his work', *The Studio*, volume 104 (1932), pp350-353.
- 36 See, for example, 'Are these the Pictures for Modern Rooms', *The Studio*, volume 111, number 518, June 1936, pp331-333.
- 37 See, for example, the review 'British art in Industry', volume 109, (February, 1935), where *The Studio* admits that 'The inspiration provided by machine forms, the satisfying simplicity which follows from the logic of the machine, has not yet received full attention', yet also concedes that '...it is a beginning' and 'The eyes of the public naturally turn to the Royal Academy as the centre of art...', p58.

The previous month, January 1935, *The Studio* printed for the edification of its readership the aims of the Royal Academy exhibition, p52.

I apologise for being so long - also thank
me for not writing a letter.

Transcript of a taped conversation with Myfanwy Piper

18th February 1993

MP I have to say first that the art historian who comes to these periods long after they have happened doesn't realise that nothing is cut and dried; that there is in fact no history which you can come to, and say 'it was like that'. It was argumentative: it didn't have any basic theories or if it did you rejected them. And so it's very hard for anyone trying to make a history, which is what worries me, and I hate labels.

DM Artists like Mr Piper, Paul Nash and the writings of your own were clearly trying to engage with the problems of being modern and I suppose that is what I am looking at. ^{See over - my answer to question at top}

MP In the first place you are talking of ~~three~~ ^{perhaps 2 would be more accurate here} generations. John was one generation on from Paul Nash.

APPENDIX 2
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DM What did you feel about *Unit One*? In particular their aspiration as a group, their claim to be modern, and their attitude towards the integration of art and design.

I'm not sure what you mean by 'claim to be modern'. They were modern in the sense that they didn't fit in either to the fashionable idea of art (Munnings?). or to the Royal Academy - a mix of fashionable professionals and aspiring amateurs. ^{continued over}

MP Unit One as far as I can remember was just one show which never came to anything. ^{permanent} It was ~~quite~~ a good idea. It was much more difficult for people to get shown in those days and much more difficult for them to get publicity.

During the thirties the artists and the writers, even the distinguished writers like Herbert Read, all contributed to Axis for nothing: they didn't expect to be paid for it.

There was no question of reproduction fees for artists, it was enough to be publicised. That was what they needed more than anything else. But ^{they also need to be free} individuals - free to ^{have} ~~permeate~~ their own ideas without being bound by manifestos. It was a loose association. What was important was that the members should be aware that decisions ^{etc} should always refer and defer to artist

DM At the outset Unit One were talking about group solidarity. and not the other way round.

Does the fact that Paul Nash organised them affect your view of him as essentially an 'individual'? ^{Nash *} No. Though ^{he had} many ideas for artists to help themselves by working together he never saw it as a group ~~solid~~ behaviour - but ^{like-minded} individuals associating

MP But that was before I did Axis. He was almost an elder statesman as far as we were concerned. Paul Nash was always a bit of a loner, but he was always friendly towards Axis, and we were great friends with him. Unit One didn't have anything to do with what I was doing: I was doing a magazine. I did it because I went to Paris and I met Jean Hélion and he had just attached himself to Abstraction Création and had been responsible with them for producing the magazine. And he said, what you should do is to go back to England and start a magazine. I said to him, which I

* designers who were also painters should ^{always} keep their ~~draw~~ painting as the inspiration

have recorded, that I didn't know enough, and I had no money. And he said that money would come and that I would learn. I said that somebody like Herbert Read should be doing it, and he said that I was young enough to have a failure but Herbert Read wasn't.

DM The members of *Unit One* appeared to criticise each other and didn't have a group identity anyway.

MP Nobody did really. And this was one of the problems with 7&5: because of the obstinacy of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth who considered themselves to have a religion, as it were, and none of the rest of us had.

DM Paul Nash wrote the article 'Going Modern and Being British' where he talked about the problems of working as a modern artist within a British tradition. How did you think an artist could best come to terms with these two issues?

Each artist came to terms with in his way (ind. style) in art and his experience best-

MP As far as I can remember there were quite a lot of people in this country who wanted to identify with 'modern art', as it was developing in Paris. But where the hitch came was when the war came and we were cut off from Paris. But during the period you are talking about, we were not

interested in being 'English' as such but simply our interpretation of 'modern art' may have had a twist in it, just like anybody might who had a certain view or lived in a certain place. What would come out would be personal to them. But it might still belong to a new tradition which they were interested in. Art of the generations was a unity although it had variety.

DM The article John Piper wrote with Geoffrey Grigson in *Axis* 7, called 'England's Climate' talked about the failure of modern art, saying that it lacked fullness.

MP I think that it's true.

DM What is that 'fullness'?

MP I would have thought it meant that a painter of the thirties couldn't sit down and do, say, a Poussin, because a classical painting had a certain fullness which was laid down by the terms of what that painting was. I think Jean Hélion was very good at that - the articles which he wrote about Poussin, and if you look at his paintings. You will see that he did his abstract paintings, and he would describe his paintings in terms of a Poussin. Because the

objects in a Poussin were expressed in his painting by shapes, and although they were blank of the immediate human reference, of 'Rebecca at the Well' or whatever, the rhythm of the painting was completely like a Poussin. He could describe it and you could feel the relationship between the forms and the shapes.

I think there were no criteria for the modern artist, of how to do a Poussin or a Claude, so the only licence was to do something which provided an emotional reaction to the rhythm of the picture. In that sense abstract painting was deprived. When John gave up abstract painting he said : I can't do that anymore. I've only been using it as a means of discovering how to paint. He was regarded as a renegade from some abstract ideal of the future which was believed in by Nicholson, Hepworth and the Gabos.

DM A review of *Circle* at the time described the artists as being 'anti-humanist'.

MP ^{Some} They were. Somebody like Herbert Read, who was like a grand-father to everybody, would never have allowed that, although he would have supported it intellectually, because he was a man of his time, and intelligent, and he didn't want to cut people off from their development. It was fair enough. Read was a person you had to take seriously. When

he went into a subject he was absorbed by it. There was a warmth in him that never really allowed him to cut himself off from a very genuine emotional development: ~~with~~ But he sometimes got himself into deep ideological water

DM Can we talk about the Shell Guides?

MP Jack Beddington was a very imaginative man, and he was the P.R. man in Shell, and that was how we got to know John (Betjeman). Sir James Richards was working at *Architectural Review* at the same time as Betjeman, and John (Piper) ~~was~~ *was* ~~writing articles for the AR~~ *then too* Richards said: If you're looking for people to do Shell Guides you should talk to John Piper.

DM Who were the Guides for?

MP People who had cars and wanted to look at things. Who else? *and to provide something wider and broader minded and full of better illustrations than the old little guides that were produced against Victorian even Georgian buildings and churches in favour of mediaeval*

DM Did those responsible for the Shell Guides and Posters see themselves as enthusiastic amateurs, (in Robin Ironside's sense of the phrase, as having interests which transcended the professional or vocational)?

and other shell guide writers were
MP I think that John was ^{asked} _{at} to do a journalistic job, or a poster, or a topographic _{at} job, and I don't think at any point

that they thought of themselves as amateurs. They were professionals who had the experience to be useful in this particular instance.

It was a bit fancy of Ironside; he meant a lover of something, and I saw what he meant: you weren't paid to admire something, but you loved it anyway. It is a complicated thing to answer. 'Amateur' has lost its old ~~sense~~. *Heard of meaning admirer of or knowledgeable lover of something*

DM You wrote of Paul Nash in 1937, (Axis 8), that he had 'never been subjected to the group morality' but was 'a born, untroubled individualist'. How do you reconcile this with his leadership of *Unit One*? - ~~He~~

MP That is right. But *Unit One* was just five minutes in a lifetime. I wouldn't worry about it too much. *but - as explained being an individual didn't stop him from seeing the point of artists associating to help themselves*

DM Was *A Painter's Object* conceived in relation to other publications at the time, such as *Circle*, to establish a clear artistic position? If so, how would you characterise this position?

MP What I wrote was just a squib in a way. I simply got fed up

with people getting so serious about things, and also I
thought that painters wrote better. ^{I am envious} It was not a riposte to
Circle. *A Painter's Object* was quite different, it was a
collection of essays by artists.

DM How were the contributors chosen? There wasn't anything
from Nicholson, for example.

MP He didn't write. He wasn't a writer. I was talking about
articulate artists. If he had written well I would have
~~used~~ ^{asked} him; and Barbara Hepworth. They made pronouncements
but they didn't write.

DM You wrote in *A Painter's Object* that the public saw the
artist as an entertainer. How and why do you think this
situation had arisen?

MP Peoples attitude to artists was frivolous in the thirties.
They were people who were interesting to know; more
important for their social value than anything else. It was
a frivolous remark but there was some truth in it. One
mustn't take squibs too seriously. I was flying a kite.

DM John Piper wrote in his essay that 'it will be a good thing to get back to the tree in the field'. To what extent and in what way was this project fulfilled? How widely was this ambition shared by other artists?

MP John was a topographer and was very unhappy when he was away from it, and his abstract period kept his painting away from his other love, which was topography. This was why he thought of the abstract period as a discipline which he could use.

Another thing which people always forget is that for people like John, and perhaps Graham Sutherland, the war was a fearful deprivation: it kept him away from Paris. People like Nicholson and Hepworth became more ideological and attached themselves to the extremes who wanted to change life and turn abstract art into a religion. Whereas John wanted to stick to what was going on in Paris, but was stopped. He was hampered in his topography because he couldn't get about. He used the 'tree in the field' as Cézanne might have chosen the 'apple on the dish'.

DM What about some of the younger 'neo-Romantic' artists, such as John Craxton?

MP I don't like labels. But, yes, Craxton was a friend of

ours. a young generation. Also in a sense
he was different from John & Paul Nash because
we had fallen in love with Greece and his painting
was strongly influenced by Greek light. The light had such
a strong influence that J.P. would never go to Greece.

DM When did the vitality of that art come to an end? Around
1956?

MP I suppose with the coming of the Americans to Paris after the war
American art was a great nuisance, because a lot of people
went back to being abstract. Like Victor Pasmore,

for instance. And then abstraction became much more of an
essential than it even had before: ^{it was} a kind of double ~~betrayal~~
^{not to be abstract} betrayal. After that time artists have gone for fashion and

it has never stopped. — (This is not really true — some
artists have some fashionable change and suddenly
there's a trend to but nothing in the world of painting &
sculpture is ever final — so pronouncements get silly

DM Did you (and John Piper) feel sympathetic towards the ideas
and values of Peter Fuller and his journal *Modern Painters*?

MP Yes, we did feel sympathetic. He was little over-serious,
but he died young. He wasn't very clear-headed about what

he wanted. I don't entirely approve of *Modern Painters*.
I wish that he had tried to ~~develop~~ ^{develop} ^{is amazingly acute} ^{responses}

* But for some painters it didn't come to an end
but continued in spite of being unfashionable.

APPENDIX 2
-307-

I'm afraid I've made a horrid mess of this
and have kept it a horrid long time. Looking at
it makes me feel how dangerous it is to have
interviews. I do hope you'll set something out of it
but will in the end only rely on your own
feelings. At least of the pictures themselves. And never
forget how ephemeral labels are sometimes.

82 Glebe Way
Hornchurch
Essex. RM11 3RS

9th November, 1990

Dear Sir Hugh Casson,

I am a post-graduate student with the Open University preparing a doctoral thesis on 'Englishness' in 20th Century British Art and wondered if you might be able to assist me in this work.

My recent research into the Festival of Britain, 1951, has led me to study Sir Misha Black's collection of notes and cuttings at the V&A Archives. Here I came across the 'Minutes of Design Group meeting', Thursday March 30th, 1950, where the artists to be employed by the Festival organisers were discussed. One particular sentence reads: 'The group agreed that it was not in sympathy with the work of Mr D. Grant, and Mr Casson undertook to ask the D.G. if he would agree that Mr. Grant should not receive a commission.'

I wondered if you might be able to recall why it was felt that Duncan Grant's work was unsuitable for inclusion at the Festival, although I am aware that he was included in the exhibition '50 paintings for '51' which was organised by the Arts Council.

Your assistance in this matter would help to advance my work and would be greatly appreciated. I thank you in anticipation and enclose an SAE for your reply.

Yours sincerely,

David Masters.

Excuse School writing Paper. An cavalier
particular & sitting on my knee,
F.O.B.

1. Fine Art was dealt with in 1951 by the Arts Council - who either organised or advised upon or helped to finance exhibitions of Fine Art all over the country.
2. The "art" - illustrative & decorative arts - in the exhibition in Belfast, Glasgow & London (S. Bank) were dealt with by the design teams appointed with to help provide for the Design Group of the major exhibition (the South Bank)
3. This Design Group interviewed artists wishing to receive commissions, listed those whom work was considered eligible. Every architect on the South Bank (2) of them) was asked to suggest for & place some piece of "fine art" - mural, tapestry, graphics, sculpture etc - in his partition. He was asked to nominally suggest ~~to~~ he must suitable but such a fear, is the ignorance of so many architects about artists. My usual had to be assisted in their choice.

4. ^{Many} a worker illustrating 'News' - transport - industry - education etc - were expected to hold their own against strong visual competition - i.e. a streamlined locomotive, a racing dinghy, a ship's propeller etc. Many "fine artists."

were considered too "painterly" for this task & were pushed over to Art Council for one or other gallery ~~with~~ gallery & library

5. Duncan Grant & Patrick Heron I remember were once considered for Design Group but eventually placed in "Exhibition in Gallery" pigeon hole. It sounds bossy & unimaginative & no doubt was - but the decision of the Design Group was always unanimous over if wrong? Grant I think was regarded as too "decorative" & "ballet-dance-like" in his mural & unlikely to register to its credit except perhaps in a restaurant.

5. In addition to Art Council Commissioner Major works of the South Bank Exhibition - 2 paintings (by Subotnick & Piper) & three sculptures (Henry Moore, Epstein, & Hepworth). There were not supposed to "work" in support of any particular exhibition theme.

6. I suppose in defence of hasty or ill-considered aesthetic decisions we have to remember that we opened a design group meeting under ideal conditions of lastingly attendees over all, the graphics for tickets, a litter bin, etc & we were in a desperate hurry! Obviously we made misjudgments - like the famous Exhibition ring door - but we did our best!

I hope this is helpful -

14/2/68

Excuse school writing paper. Am convalescing partly in bed and scribbling on my knee.

F.O.B.

1. Fine Art was dealt with in 1951 by the Arts Council - who either organised & advised upon or helped to finance exhibitions of Fine Art all over the country.
2. The "art" - illustrative & decorative arts - in the exhibition in Belfast, Glasgow & London (S. Bank) were dealt with by the design teams appointed with the help of Misha from (?) the Design Group of the major exhibition (the South Bank)
3. This Design Group interviewed artists wishing to receive commissions. listed those whose work was considered eligible. Every architect on the South Bank (27 of them) was asked to budget for and place some piece of "fine art" - mural. tapestry. graphics. sculpture etc - in his pavilion. He was asked to nominate anyone he thought suitable but such, I fear, is the ignorance of so many architects about artists they usually had to be assisted in their choice.
4. They worked(?) illustrating 'themes' - transport - industry - education etc - even expected to hold their own against strong visual competition - i.e. a streamlined locomotive, a racing dinghy, a ships propeller etc. Many "fine artists" were considered too "painterly" for this task and were pushed over to the Arts Council for one or other of their gallery exhibitions.

(Page two)

5. Duncan Grant & Patrick Heron I remember were both considered by the Design Group but eventually placed in an "exhibition in gallery" pigeon hole. It sounds bossy & unimaginative & no doubt was, but the decision of the Design Group was always unanimous even if wrong! Grant I think was regarded as too "decorative" & "ballet-backcloth" in his murals & unlikely to register to its credit except perhaps in a restaurant.

5.(sic) In addition the Arts Council commissioned major works for the South Bank Exhibition - 2 paintings (by Sutherland & Piper) & three sculptures (Henry Moore, Epstein, & Hepworth) These were not supposed "to work" in support of any particular exhibition theme

6. I suppose in defence of hasty or ill-considered aesthetic decisions we have to remember that the(?) agenda of a design group meeting would include the design of lavatory attendants overalls, the graphics for tickets, a litter bin, etc & we were in a desperate hurry! Obviously we made misjudgements - like the Summer Exhibition jury does! but we did our best!

I hope this is helpful.

Hugh Casson.

Transcript of a tape-recorded conversation with William Gear
Birmingham, 24th November, 1990

WG The Tate, by the way, bought two paintings from the Redfern show.

DM This year's Redfern show?

WG Yes, I can show you, they are in the catalogue. This one on the front cover, (Composition, Aug 19~~54~~), and then one called 'The Sculptor', (June/July 1953). Two very important paintings.

DM They are two paintings you particularly value yourself?

WG Yes I do. Well literally all the paintings in the show were, of their period, masterpieces in a sense: of those that I still had. I can say that all of these, or most of the paintings shown, I had the practise of paintings which had been around or been on show or didn't find a buyer or collector, rather than go to the expense of buying more chassis I used to take them off their chassis and roll them up and then re-stretch canvas and re-use the chassis. And that was the case certainly with literally, well most of them anyway. I had taken them off twenty or thirty years ago and just rolled them up. And then in recent times I have gone through them and re-stretched them and framed them. Some of them were never exhibited, ever.

DM What governed the selection of works for this particular exhibition?

WG The intention was to show the paintings of the period of COBRA and after, so they are mainly paintings up to the 1950's...'The Sculptor' was painted in England in a farmhouse.

DM Why do you think it was that those paintings didn't sell at the time?

WG Well the trouble was I was what you might call probably one of the two or three avant-garde painters in England at the time and there were very few collectors, there were very few galleries. There was Gimpels and to some extent the Redfern, but I can't think of any other galleries who were consistently exhibiting contemporary avant-garde younger painters. There may have been one or two who would include the odd piece, but Gimpels really were the main gallery and I showed with them regularly. Again, there were probably no more than half a dozen collectors, maybe three or four, and of course none of the provincial or national galleries, like the Tate, touched that kind of stuff at all...

I first exhibited at Gimpels in '48. From the exhibition I think I sold maybe three watercolours or gouaches, no oils at all. Then in my next show in '49 at Gimpels, again I sold maybe one oil and two or three works on card, but that was the sort of scale. And then you might get some enlightened character like Philip Hendy, or someone like that, who was the buyer for the Contemporary Arts Society or the Arts Council bought perhaps one thing. That painting you saw in the South Bank, ('Christmas Tree', 1950, shown at the Festival Hall foyer exh., 'Festival of 51', Oct 1990), they probably paid no more than fifty pounds for that...

The Arts Council were very good and the British Council were also very open but they didn't buy particularly. They would show your work abroad and pay you some kind of hiring fee which is always useful, and with them I exhibited in numerous places on the continent - Japan and all that - but that is the problem. I can't think of any provincial galleries - like Birmingham, Manchester or Glasgow - they might most adventurously force the committee to buy a small Graham Sutherland or maybe a Henry Moore and the local press would be up in arms about spending money on this lump of old iron with a hole in it. This is the sort of criticism that they got. You can see the sort of treatment I got.

DM Weren't people on the whole much more sympathetic to artists like Moore and Sutherland?

WG I think that gradually they became accepted but rather later on. Among the artists the two main leaders were people like Moore and Sutherland. Their work was acceptable at a certain level, but anything a little more labelled 'abstract'. They stuck this label on and it was equated with communism; I used to get this sort of thing thrown at me. This is the period of Mc Carthy too, and it didn't matter who the hell you were, you could be a royalist or the most arch-Tory. Of course we were bitterly attacked by the Royal Academicians and publicly.

DM Before we move on you did say that the two paintings that the Tate have just purchased what you felt were seminal pieces. Why do you regard them as important?

WG How do you say? Well put it this way, 'The Sculptor' - around that period, late '52/'53, my paintings emerged looking like sculptures, so to speak. I possibly had a hankering that I'd like to do sculpture, and there was always a sculptural element in my paintings, anyway. And during that period I probably did a number of paintings, between six and eight months, maybe a year. Some of them were called 'sculpture project' or 'study for sculpture', or words like that, and what I would have said would be that I can't be bothered with the actual mechanics and structure of the damned thing - I ought to

be able to say to a young sculptor, like Henry Moore did, 'Here's my design, knock it up for me'...But it's not designed for a sculpture, it's a painting.

What struck me the other day, I went to the Monet exhibition and this painting, (of Rouen Cathedral). This really, forget Rouen Cathedral, you could make a structure of this. It's not a picture of a cathedral, it's a painting - a structure and I found it quite extraordinary that even the quality of ~~my~~ *matiere* 'chair' (referring to 'Composition, Aug 1949') that maybe I knew this painting and there was an influence, I don't know. Or similarly the other day I was in the Tate and I was looking at the Picasso nude, Cubist period, and that could be sculpture.

As I say these were two major pieces and the Tate thought so. All the staff came two by two partly to make their decision. These are museum pieces. If some individual collectors wanted to buy them I would have resisted - I'd rather keep them for myself.

DM Were many other paintings sold?

WG Yes, a total of about seventeen items altogether

DM Did this surprise you?

WG No, it didn't.

DM Do you think there is perhaps an increase in interest in your work?

WG I'm exhibiting all over the place - in Sweden, Germany, Paris - but it is basically in the last ten years that the COBRA movement, that is hardly even now known about in England, is the important movement in Europe...They are now realising that COBRA was the most important post-war European movement and infinitely more important now with the new young stars, the Germans, like Baselitz and Penck - it is neo-COBRA...The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, they paid a £125,000 for a wood-carving by Baselitz; this was six months ago. They wanted to buy one of my pictures in this exhibition from Redfern, but they said 'Well, I'm afraid until the next financial year we're a bit skint'. I'm not joking. They didn't say, 'Well of course we bought the Baselitz and so we don't have any money for the Gear' and we weren't talking about a £125,000 either. You get these star names and therefore all the big galleries... have got to have one...

DM Looking at the early fifties, what was your brief when you were chosen to paint a picture for '60 paintings for '51'?

WG Well the brief was the most open and marvellous briefing - it was no briefing at all...Bear in mind I was in Paris when all this came about, I'd had two exhibitions in London, at Gimpels, by that time and various exhibitions here and there...The terms were you are one of sixty painters chosen, and they sent me a list, and we want you to paint one big picture...You were invited to let the Arts Council know what size of canvas you wanted and they provided the canvas.

DM Why did you particularly choose Autumn Landscape?

WG Well it so happened we found this cottage in the country, or rather it was lent to us by friends, a tiny cottage in a tiny hamlet, not even a village, in Buckinghamshire, and it really was a tiny place with an outside shit-house even. And there was a very severe winter; with a wife and baby and my wife was pregnant with the next one. There was one room down below with an open fire and one room up above. And so they delivered this canvas, 70"x50", and I painted upstairs in this little room and I had to take this canvas to bits and the chassis to bits in order to get it upstairs and re-assemble it. I did two or three things about the same time, and of course I was doing my normal work because I was having a show at Gimpels in '51....And when it was finished I had to let them know that it was ready to collect and I had to take it down again.

DM At the time Philip James, in The Studio, said that a lot of the criticism could have been avoided if you had simply called your painting Composition in Green and Brown or given it an opus number. What did you think of this suggestion?

WG It so happened that we were living in the country, it was in the Autumn, the painting was painted during November/December, and I did a number of paintings called Autumn Landscape. I had Autumn Landscape numbers 1, 2, and 3 - smaller versions...I can still remember going in and about the woods, the Beech woods around there, it's lovely country - great Beech woods...I would go into the woods and pick up sticks for the fire. If I'd been able to take some of these critics out and show them the bloody conditions I had to work under to produce things and then these bastards in London in their cosy Hampstead studios, writing about this Bolshevik twit.

DM Although many of the critics very much liked your painting. I noticed in the Telegraph that Edith Sitwell wrote in great defence of your work.

WG Generally speaking the intelligentsia were for me. The funny thing was most of the criticism was long before the painting had ever been seen. To judge a painting from a little black and white press photo!

DM When you did the painting and it was taken away to the Festival, did it occur to you that it would create such a furore?

WG No. Bear in mind I hadn't lived in England at all, ever. I was Scots and I'd spent most of my student days in Scotland, I was conscripted into the army in early 1940 and I was abroad for most of the war in the Middle East and Italy and Germany. As soon as I demobbed from Germany I went straight to Paris. So I didn't know what England was like, I really didn't. In Germany or in Paris you were a painter and you lived with painters and most of the people you knew they knew about painting. I came to England and I had no colleagues or pals who were painters; I didn't know anyone.

DM Were there no other artists who you felt you could share ideas with?

WG One or two of them I'd met in Paris - people like Alan Davie who'd visited me in Paris, or Peter Lanyon. And another chap called Charles Howard, and Merlyn Evans. But I didn't know the 'Art Establishment'. I remember in Paris we lived in a village and I exhibited in the Salon des Realites Nouvelles, and going to the opening and my butcher was there. Could you imagine that here? And you didn't think it extraordinary - a totally different mentality and civilization.

DM You said in the Telegraph: 'All this is very English and for the most part amusing, but on examination is not quite so innocuous as at first sight'.

WG You see there was a Labour Government, and the Arts Council was a government body, and a lot of the criticism was aimed at the government. In the same way that you might criticise the whole idea of 'this damned stupid Festival thing' You could see the undercurrents. You see it happening today: 'Why do you want to spend all that money on ballet?' I get this from Birmingham councillors.

DM So where does this Philistinism reside?

WG It's a psychological thing. It's a class thing if you like. It's in part those who presume to be underdog but are not really underdog who have still got this kind of left-wing, shop-steward, trade union attitude to the arts and they are suspect of anything...like poetry or ballet...They are trying to put over to the public that we are common people and we don't want this highfalutin nonsense.

DM But the criticisms particularly in the Telegraph came from Colonel such and such....

WG Exactly. this is what I was saying earlier - anti-Labour government. in part. or anything that might appear to be searching around.

DM So it comes from two levels - from above and from below: the two work together?

WG Who in many cases reflect the attitude passed down to them from the other level.

DM How did you feel about the exhibition '60 for '51'. The catalogue described its intention to exhibit a 'lively cross-section of contemporary British painting'. To what extent do you think it succeeded in achieving this?

WG The committee after much deliberation chose the sixty artists who they thought were the best in the country. but the resultant exhibition was really a rather dreary affair quite honestly. The fact is there weren't sixty staggeringly good artists. And one of the problems was that they had this idea of everybody doing a big painting. Now most of these artists were accustomed to doing quite small easel paintings. in part because of the war: it was a natural approach. Immediately before, during, and after the war you couldn't get large canvases anyway even if you wanted. It was beyond most of them and this was one of the problems. Anyway it was a noble gesture on the part of the Arts Council and they got more stick than they deserved.

DM Were there works that you felt were successful?

WG Yes. I was very impressed by Lucian Freud - for a very young man. There were certain others - the Pasmore, and the Lanvin, possibly the Hitchens and the Merlyn Evans but there was very little. I would find probably ten items I'd want to have.

DM Did you feel that the prize-winners represented a fair cluster of artistic styles.

WG This is obviously what they tried to do. the jury: they took one of the best of each approach - I happened to be the abstract boy. It would have been fatal if they had gone for all the abstract ones...

DM What did you think of the Peter Lanvin there. It wasn't exactly abstract in the sense that it has recognisable things in it?

WG It's hanging in the Tate now. They've got a new hanging that's just opened with one of mine in it. They've called this new assembly 'COBRA and Primitivism' - I don't know where they got that one from...I was speaking to someone at the Redfern at

the opening for Adrian Heath. I said, 'You have a painting of mine of 1949'. He said, 'but it doesn't have that magical quality of the primitive birds and beasts and fishes and stuff'. Some of these guys would like to bracket and label COBRA...Many are what I would like to call 'COBRA Abstractions' ...The first big exhibition in Amsterdam was called 'International Experimental Art', or something like that, it wasn't called COBRA. The three or four dominant people like Asger Jorn, Constant and Appel especially had this kind of primitive thing to do with child-art and madmen but this wasn't the only characteristic. People try to boil it down to this one aspect.

The importance of it was that in those days, we are talking about '48, '49, '50ish in Europe, none of us had been out to New York. We didn't know what the hell was going on out there - there were no exhibitions or journals, transparencies or photos and all that - or we didn't want to know what was going on, quite honestly. I knew one or two GI/'Bill of Rights' characters in Paris. There was a system whereby any American who had served six months in the forces could opt to go and study somewhere and many of them thought, 'Great, lets go to Paris'....There were a few painters and they would mention names like Gorky or de Kooning but they were just names - you never saw their work in Paris...Nor could one go to America.

DM Your work was shown at Betty Parsons gallery in New York in 1949 alongside Pollock's but you didn't actually go then?

WG What happened was that I met my wife in Paris and she was American, this was early '49. We were going to get married in Paris but she had to go back to New York to see her parents so I said why don't you take some water-colours and some gouaches, perhaps you could show them to a gallery and we might try to get a show. I knew a sculptor in Paris at the time called Zadkine - he had been in New York during the war...He said there's a gallery called Betty Parsons and she might be interested. So my wife took an armful of these things in a folio and knocked at the door and said, 'This is a friend of mine in Paris...', and immediately she was very interested...Betty Parsons came to Paris, looked me up, and took some more back with her. I got a card saying that she was putting me on in an exhibition with one of her artists called Jackson Pollock. Now I'd heard the name, and I told one of these GI boys, Milton Resnick, 'I've got this exhibition on with this fella Jackson Pollock'. He said, 'He's the guy who does his painting with dripping cans'. I said, 'Jesus Christ, who's this man I'm exhibiting with?' I had done dribbling myself in Germany and given it up - you get bored - like children. Anyway, this exhibition, I think I sold one, maybe two things.

DM So you didn't like Pollock's work?

WG I didn't really know it, I'd never seen it. I can't say I ever liked it. I saw he was opening up something but it's like an interesting wallpaper - what he does he does well but I never really felt...bearing in mind I was still living in Paris I had been brought up on Leger and Bonnard.

DM What made you start dripping paint?

WG I did a lot of work in Germany, on paper chiefly. I was doing things that I'd probably come across from seeing Paul Klee, and it was a sort of natural progression. I went to some trouble. I knew some people from a colour manufacturers in Hanover, and I got the chief chemist...to mix up a pigment which I can put on thick and dribble and will dry hard reasonably well...

DM Did you feel it wasn't going to lead you anywhere?

WG The most amusing thing about this is that...in Paris in the studio place there was a washbasin. When we settled in I whitewashed the whole place and did it up. I wanted to put something behind the taps and I found this thing (one of my 'drip paintings') and I pinned it behind the taps. When Betty Parsons came to the studio she said, 'That's interesting', and by this time it was all splashed with soap. I don't know what happened to it.

DM Where, in the early fifties, did you see evidence of avant-garde art practice in Britain?

WG The main centres were the galleries: Gimpels and Redfern, and there began to be groupings of artists too. But I was never one to join groups or to settle in artists colonies but by this time you were establishing in St Ives...a group of English avant-garde artists. In London there were hot pockets of people: Alan Davie and Merlyn Evans and Ceri Richards.

DM Are you grouping them together?

WG No, not as a group but these are individuals. They weren't necessarily associated in any way unless perhaps they may have been members of the London Group. The London Group was a useful basis as a group - I became a member in 1953. But that was a pretty good cross-section of what was going on. It held within it a number of what you might call the earlier avant-gardists: people like Sir Matthew Smith, for instance, and William Roberts. You were normally elected to join the group but there was an open send-in, this was the thing...There was a selection jury, I served on it once or twice. But at least there was an open show - it was one of the very few where anyone could send in, nobody sent in to the Royal Academy. There was the other place - the AIA in ~~Lyle~~ Lisle Street...

DM Were the interests of the London Group more European based to start with and then changed when the art world seemed more interested in what was going on in America?

WG There was a kind of development suddenly in the mid-fifties when there was a big exhibition of American painting in the Tate Gallery and that suddenly opened up the eyes of the painters, some of whom had been gravitating in that direction: people like Heron. By this time some of them had already been to America: I hadn't. My first visit to New York was in '57, I had an exhibition there.

DM When you finally went to America did it change your initial scepticism towards Pollock or any of the other American artists?

WG The main impact of the Americans was the scale. They all seemed to paint nothing less than a ten foot canvas. In Europe, generally, you simply couldn't do this - you couldn't afford it. Even the canvas was rationed. Paints were difficult. All these things had been telling. For instance, you might aspire to spending a lot of money to get a big canvas and paint but no one's going to buy it from you. It was just a luxury. But in America it didn't mean anything at all. You could go out and buy fifty metres of cotton-duck and sixteen gallon cans of paint and away you went.

But this couldn't happen in Europe. In America they had the backing of the critics, and museums, and the big collectors with money. And of course once you were a 'name' in America; well first of all they suddenly realised, 'We've got some painters in America', and you've got maybe a thousand museums, galleries, colleges, universities plus private foundations, etc., who are queuing up to buy a Klein or a Pollock or whatever. You literally had a guaranteed market as soon as these chaos were established names. And they also had the support of 'Life' magazine, and 'Time' magazine; it was a different set-up altogether. You didn't have the 2½ galleries like you had in London but fifty galleries who were on to a good thing...

American art for the very first time ever was even having an influence in Europe, then they knew they were on to something, there was a sense of pride, even.

DM Did you feel it was influencing you?

WG Not really, no. I was already an established painter and I had my own style...and I was still Paris orientated...

DM How did you feel about the so called 'Young Turks' at the ICA in the early fifties?

WG The ICA did a great job at the time and they had good exhibitions there and they encouraged the so-called 'young turks'. I showed there in mixed bag shows several times. I didn't have much sympathy for what you might call 'Pop Art'.

DM Alloway's collection of 'Nine Abstract Artists' in 1954 is often cited as one of the first intelligent commentaries on the development of abstract art in this country. What did you feel about this work?

WG It was good that someone like Alloway should give that much recognition to these people who, most of them, were serious, gifted artists at the time. I vaguely remember being approached about this - I forget who approached me. As I said at the time I didn't want to know about groups...I just didn't bother that's all...

DM Was there a point in the fifties when it was more important for a British artist to appear 'American' rather than 'European'?

WG This is very true...When I became Head of Fine Art at Birmingham in '54...then there were bags of magazines and reproductions and slides and exhibitions and lectures so the students were familiar with the damned thing, you might say almost unfortunately...

The thing has gone a complete circle now. I have been into student exhibitions in more recent times and America is completely forgotten. They do not want to know...

DM You are talking about things coming a full circle. One thing about the eighties is the manifestation of a 'little Englandism' in journals like 'Modern Painters'. We are getting anti-Americanism but we are getting no greater sympathy with the likes of yourself

WG I think this is true. I get 'Modern Painters' and I was very sorry about Fuller. I thought he was doing an interesting job - not a great job. He was taking a view that needed to be taken. He was trying to show that we had something here, but that is always dangerous...Its useful, that approval, so long as it isn't pure chauvinism...

DM Your work wasn't shown at the R.A's 1987 show of '20th Century British Art'. Instead the work of Alan Davie, Patrick Heron, Peter Lanyon and Roger Hilton seemed to feature. Why do you think this was so?

WG There were quite a number of people who should have been there - William Scott, for instance, and Merlyn Evans...I remember making a list. I saw the show. It did no good to the reputation to some of them either; Bomberg did some interesting

things in those early day, interesting historically shall we say...but they showed twelve or fifteen of the damned things...but this was Cork who was about to issue his book on Bomberg...At about the same time I was preparing for a big one man show in Paris...I've been through the mill so often...it doesn't really bother me...

...Books are turned out all the time. There's this one by Frances Spalding, (British Painting since 1900). I bought it because there's something of mine in it. Now listen to this; these are the people who are not mentioned in the book: Merlyn Evans, Ceri Richards, William Gillies, John Maxwell, Barry Cooke, William Hayter, Patrick Procter, F. E. Mc William, Medley,...I wrote to her...'Yes it is a great pity that many more names didn't get in', (she replied), as if you were late for a train...This is pathetic stuff.

DM Do you feel that the 'Englishness' which you referred to in 1951 is any different now?

WG What goes for 'Modern Art' is much more familiar to the widest possible public; in part because of the exhibitions, television even. There are many more collectors too...So the whole thing has changed altogether. And, additionally, there is more money about...Degree shows in art colleges these days, they come in and buy off the walls...Many students can leave college with a few thousand quid in their pockets from sales...People up to their forties, you might call them yuppies, have money and walls - they have the interest.

...The situation has changed dramatically (in the last few months)...Three situations that have happened in the last few weeks about my exhibition. First of all, the Tate wanted to buy two things but they said to my dealer, 'We like these, but we really haven't any money to spare at the moment, until the next financial year'...And we're not talking about hundreds of thousands either, we are talking about a few thousand. Anyway they came to some sort of arrangement...

The gallery in Glasgow, the City of Glasgow Art Gallery, they wanted one big one...but finally they said, 'We haven't any money'.

Extraordinarily, there is a Bank called Flemings Bank which is a Scottish Merchant Bank, and they buy Scottish paintings...they were keen to buy one of mine...but finally they came along to the gallery and said, 'The fact is ...we have had to make redundant thirty members of staff, and we hardly feel we can buy a painting in the face of thirty redundancies...

Major galleries and collectors are feeling the pinch...and it is beginning to hurt...

82 Glebe Way
Hornchurch
Essex. BR5 3PJ

Dear Matthew,

Thank you for agreeing to help with my research. I list below some questions which relate to your particular article and would appreciate your response to them. In addition I have enclosed a copy of the questions I had hoped to put to 'Modern Painters' had they agreed to see me. Again, if you feel you can help me with any of these I would be most grateful.

Questions

- 1 Who invited you to contribute to the first issue of MP?
- 2 Whose idea was it to title the article, 'Doing it by the book - Matthew Collings interviews Matthew Collings'?
- 3 Who posed the questions?
- 4 Was the article intended to antagonise, amuse or challenge the reader?
- 5 How do you feel about contributing to a journal where the editorial and most of the contributors are hostile to a voice such as yours? (ie. as a representative of 'The Art World').

Unless you indicate otherwise I will assume that you are happy for me to use your reply in my thesis.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely,

David Masters.

Dear David,

28.10.90

Sorry to be so long with this.

I find it difficult to talk very objectively about my days at Antiscribe, as it is still the source of very deep feelings of anger and betrayal, etc etc. Consequently I have been unconsciously/on purpose forgetting to think about your questions. Anyway — here you are:

- ① ~~mine~~ Peter Fuller
- ② Mine
- ③ all my questions except one that sounds obviously out of character, referring to Peter's "ideas," which

was of course P. F.'s question put in at the last minute.

4. Mainly to put the record straight about why I was no longer involved with ATsrike, as wild rumors had been circulating on this subject. I felt the truth ought to be known. But of course also all the other things you mention.

5. I find that very difficult to answer... I do not identify with MP's editorial "line." I was always surprised when it was suggested that I "supported" MP by writing for it —

I always thought my own line was crushingly obvious in the few "diary" columns I contributed, but perhaps I was being naive.

Modern Painters Question

- ② Apparently there was — see editorial by Karen Wingat in issue following PF's death
- ③ As far as I know, the major shareholders are Tony Elliot + (Tim out) Bernard Jacobson. (Certainly Tony Elliot had most clout ~~had~~ at business meetings)
- ④ They claim 10-12,000. Butserke (for example) was always far less.

4

- ⑤ From my experience of New York & European venues, modern painting is hardly seen at all abroad. Although I know PF was very hot on getting a NY audience going....

Hope this is of
some help —

Best wishes —
M. Cow

Transcript of a taped conversation with David Batchelor
11 December, 1994.

① DM Brandon Taylor (in the exhibition *Critical Realism*) suggested that the sort of realist impulses he defined had somehow been crushed by modernism.

DB My argument to that would be that (it is wrong) to presuppose that modernism and realism are counter-posed to one another. I think that in a way modernism has been the realism of the twentieth century in acknowledging the autonomy of art and the specialisation of all cultural activities ... and all intellectual work. It is a condition of realism, not an antithesis to it ... A Don Judd box seems to have more about it of the late twentieth century than something like an Ed Kienholz...

② DM Brandon Taylor seemed to be part of a broader ranging conservatism.

DB You get this bizarre situation where modernism is attacked from the left, from the right, by the feminists, by the 'ethnicians'. If that's the case there must be something interesting about it. Greenberg's become almost an anti-Christ...

...The attempt to revive some tradition of figure painting ... does have a curious effect of uniting the apparent left and the apparent right...

...You feel quite isolated if you try to cling on to any semblance of modernism as having some value left in it ... When I come across modernist paintings in museums I still find them more arresting than a lot of other stuff ... They still look fresh - not all of it.

③ DM How did your work fit into the context of *Critical Approaches to Realism*?

DB Not very well ... Mine was the only abstract work there ... It was the only one that didn't have any overt or specific iconographic aspects to it ... although Rasheed Araeen's work, and Art and Language, and Terry Atkinson acknowledged the presence of modernism ... If all of the work could be labelled 'realist', which plausibly it could be, you couldn't use the same concept of realism to apply to all of the work. Moreover the realism of, say, Art and Language's work was in complete contradiction to the realism of Sonia Boyce's work. There were contradictory concepts of 'realism' embodied in the work in the show...

④ DM What would you define as the remnants of modernism that you still engage with?

DB First of all, an interest in the idea of abstraction, of the monochrome, even down to the shaped canvas ... The starting point was me acknowledging to myself ... the uncertain relationship between painting and sculpture, and the way it broke down in the sixties. A lot of that work remained to me more vivid

than a lot else I have seen. The question was, how could I refer to that work without just mimicking it? In terms of post-modern quotation its much easier to quote a figurative painting by turning it upside down ... But how can you quote a monochrome without it just being another monochrome, or a bad monochrome. It seemed that certain kinds of abstract art were harder to obviously ironise. O.K. Art and Language ironised Pollock and gesture painting. But how can you ironise a blank canvas or a completely flat canvas? ... I came to think that I couldn't ironise it. I didn't want to ironise it. I began to become disillusioned with irony, particularly the way it had become conventionalised in art during the eighties. I don't think it's a particularly strong device any more. For me the best ironists are Marx, William Blake and Joseph Conrad, and they are modernists, in a way, to a man. The way irony was used in the eighties was a way of avoiding big issues of life and death and right and wrong ... I wouldn't call my work ironic now...

... I think there has been a weakening of irony in postmodern work. For me the best irony is about life and death; its about real human struggle, not a way of avoiding those sorts of questions.

... The thinking, very simply, behind my work with the picture frames was that as a result of Marcel Duchamp, and conceptual art in particular, the idea had become fairly entrenched that the essence of art was not given intrinsically in the work but whether it was in a museum. That is the framing effect - anything you put in a frame could be art ... The museum or the magazine became a metaphorical frame. I thought I'd take that very literally and make the frame into the work rather than the surrounds of the work. The question was, how do you do that? I didn't want to have a series of empty frames on the wall - that would look too smart-arsed and conceptual for words. So by shaping the frame ... you could, in the Derridian sense, turn the supplement into the main thing. A lot of that work was based on drawing ...

... I would see all my work as abstract and connected to the conventions of modernism from the sixties. But this doesn't deny reference or meaning in the work.

⑤ DM One of the objections to the exhibition (*Approaches to Realism*) was that it was just intellectual playing around. John Roberts wrote in the exhibition broadsheet that he believed there to be the issue of aesthetic autonomy at stake as well. There was a 'remainder' in the work that could not be explained away.

DB I think that anyone who is a critic or curator rather than an historian tends to see the art in the studio ... If you go into a studio you have a different relationship with art ... You are always faced with the question, why do I like that work better than that one? 'Why?' comes down unavoidably to some unspeakable sense.

⑥ DM That sounds like Greenberg talking about Pollock.

DB I think it is. Perhaps one of the reasons he has become so misunderstood and reviled is that he was a critic...

... Every artist knows that some of his or her work is better. Not that it deals with ideas more cleverly, but it looks better - it hangs on the wall better. Everyone has a duty to beware of their good taste, but you can't avoid questions of taste. I think that questions of the aesthetic are autonomous from intellectual or moral questions. What has tended to happen both in the conservative anti-modernism and in post-modernism is some confusion about ethics, morals and aesthetics ... I think the world is more interesting if you keep morals and art apart from one another...

(7) DM You would defend your taste on what criteria?

DB I don't agree with Greenberg's idea that it is involuntary, pure and detached. It's all to do with your knowledge, education and expectations and so forth. You go and look at any work as best informed as you can be ... Art is a highly specialized activity ... What you look out for is work that connects with the tradition of art in some way but which also re-invents it or does something with it that you wouldn't expect it to be able to do ... I (also) want to allow space for a slightly unformed and intuitive response to something ...

(8) DM Would you say that your judgement depends on your professional engagement with art in a way that is contrary to the dilettantism of Fry or Bell.

DB Even Fry and Bell knew they were talking about people of their class and education. There is no question that art is a highly developed activity.

(9) DM Fuller's diatribe was against the 'Art World International' saying that it was elitist and not available to the 'ordinary people'.

DB I don't think art is available to ordinary people ... Our whole world is subject to massive levels of specialization.

(10) DM So what was Fuller defending?

DB ... Fuller was the most elitist of critics because he never offered an argument ... One thing about Greenberg you couldn't fault was that he would offer some sort of explanation. If you offer some sort of explanation I can't see how that is elitist.

(11) DM There were two forms of criticism aimed at *Modern Painters*: those who took issue with him about which artists should be included in the canon of 'great art', (eg. Toni del Renzio), and those, such as yourself, who believed that Fuller's position had to be attacked at a more structural level.

DB ...Although Fuller claimed to be deeply engaged with his work, most of the work he talked about was used to illustrate his thesis - the thesis existed about the Britishness of British Art and ... if he could slot a work into that then he did

... There was no point complaining about what illustrated his text or not ... The thing that was politically reprehensible was the idea of Little Englander art.

... There was this curious thing you got with Thatcher as well: claiming to inherit the radicalism or rhetoric of the sixties and turn it entirely against itself into some deeply conservative position...

... But I must say that the rise of *Modern Painters* was one of the most enjoyable moments because it gave for once a kind of focus ... I loved going out and getting my copy to see what was in it and thinking, 'Great, there's the enemy, let's have a go at it'. It led to a good inter-change of text ...

... If there had been an editorial in *Artscribe* saying that what we represent is art as something to do with internationalism and cosmopolitanism, and to quite explicitly state the antipathy, I think there could have been quite a good set-to ... But *Artscribe* never did that...

12

DM ...You said that at one time *Artscribe* was a far more provincial magazine. When was that?

DB Well, it started as a student magazine. When I was an art student in Nottingham in the mid-seventies I was working with some people who were having a degree show, and these couple of lads came along who were starting this magazine, and it was an A3 black and white newspaper format ... It then became a vehicle for a group of London-based gestural or colour field abstract painters. When Matt Collings came along a lot of the English painters felt disenfranchised...

... By the late eighties *Artscribe* bothered me. Stuart Morgan (then editor) was more concerned with an ethereal, romantic, enigmatic kind of art. It wasn't so much that *Modern Painters* had won but that the battle had dissolved ... Sadly, the moment had passed.

13

DM Although, as you say, the art world is a small one, *Modern Painters* was symptomatic of a wider set of values and ideals which were pervasive at the time.

DB Yes, *Modern Painters* could be seen as implicated within the whole thing that Thatcherism was. That had to be resisted ... For a time a few of us were enjoying this. I think things could have been different if *Artscribe* had taken the bait. It could have brought in more interesting people from the left to raise the level of debate about art; although a lot of people from the left write very badly about art ...

... I don't think your political position gives you any privileged entry into a discussion about art. Left and right come up with the same arguments half the time ...

⑭ DM How do you see the relationship between modernism, ethnicity and Britishness?

DB ... There is this argument that modernism is Eurocentric - it is European but I don't think it is Eurocentric. I take Eurocentric to mean that what other cultures have produced doesn't matter ... When Picasso used Iberian masks it is often seen as a form of cultural imperialism ... But you could take a positive line and say that artists were looking outside a moribund European tradition for things to revivify their art ... I don't think this does violence to those other traditions...

⑮ DM The argument against Rasheed Araeen was that he was part of an elite, Black intelligentsia and failed to further a 'black' cause.

DB Rasheed Araeen is first and foremost an artist ... Artists make art. To demand that artists became politicians is something I do not understand. Art is a minority interest ... You are not going to change the world by being an artist.

⑯ DM Can't art prod and probe and intervene as an 'act of resistance' against conservative values.

DB I think it can, but in a fairly quiet and philosophical, rather than political, way. I would like a world where people had more access to art. By this I mean through education...

... I am involved in art not because I think it can change the world but maybe more that art represents one of those few places where there is space to think and reflect. Art provides a space for a sort of virtual freedom, rather than a real freedom...

...The art I am interested in enables me to sustain a conversation with a few people ... It sounds quite defeatist but I cannot see it as part of a bigger political project. I don't recognise politics now as anything I am connected with ... (Art) is about resistance, but on a much smaller scale ...

⑰ DM To what extent are internationalism and abstraction crucial elements in this resistance?

DB They are in some curious way fundamental to my conception of art. Insofar as abstraction is so unfashionable at the moment, then I guess this is a bit Kling Canutish. Internationalism is fundamental to an understanding of my place in the world ... The idea of an international cultural interchange has to be a good thing. It is so built into the sense of myself, that I assume it to be the case...

⑱ DM ...Do you think that it is now hard to assert the cause of 'Internationalism'?

DB The whole century has been dominated by contrary pulls of nationalism and

internationalism. At any one time these two seem to have different prominence in different places ... 'Internationalism' in this country is now used by the Tories as a term of abuse ... I see myself as a European ... I can't regard myself as British ... 'Culture' has become a dirty word here. We don't have a Ministry of Culture, we have a Ministry of Heritage. That for me speaks volumes. We don't have a museum of modern art, we have a museum of British Art ... Internationalism has to be a promise, a possibility...

65 Swinton Street
London WC1X 9NT
tel. 071 278 1256
fax. 071 278 0849

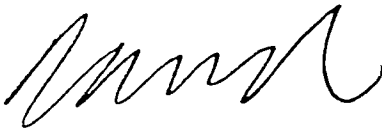
8 January

Dear David,

Thanks for the transcript of our conversation. I've had a look through it and amended it where I thought it necessary. Quite a few points needed some clarification, I thought, so I have re-typed my answers accordingly. (I'm not used to being interviewed, it's usually me who asks the questions.) I've numbered my answers 1-16 in the order of your questions.

It was good to meet you the other week. I hope all goes well with the thesis. Do get in touch if you need to.

Best wishes, happy new year, etc.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Batchelor', with a stylized, cursive script.

David Batchelor

David Masters/David Batchelor
11.12.94

1. I don't accept that opposition between modernism and realism. Rather I think modernism has been the realism of the twentieth century. The recognition of the autonomy of art and the specialisation of all cultural activities is a condition of realism not a denial of it. An Don Judd minimalist box seems to have more in it that relates to the experience of the late twentieth century than something like Ed Kienholz's 'Portable War Memorial'.

2. There's something bizarre going on when modernism is attacked by the Right, the Left, Post-modernists, pre-modernists, feminists, ethnicists, and just about everyone else. That must mean there's still something interesting about it. Anyone would think Greenberg was the anti-christ - webbed feet, '666' across the forehead, the lot.

Conversely, when the same people set out to revive some kind of figure painting tradition - or more to the point, an image fixated idea of art - you can at least enjoy the spectacle of the apparent Left and the apparent Right all trying to stand on the same spot.

You get to feel quite isolated if you cling on to the idea of Modernism having some value left in it. But in a nutshell, when I come across high Modernist work in museums - a Louis, an Andre, an early Stella or a Flavin for example - they often still look incredibly fresh, much more so than some more recent stuff.

3 Not very well. Mine was the only abstract work there. At least it was the only work which did not rely on overt or specific iconographic elements, although references to modernism and abstraction were certainly present in some of the other work - A&L's, Terry Atkinson's, Rasheed Araeen's, for example. If all the work could at a stretch be labelled 'realist', which plausibly it could, you couldn't however use the same concept of realism to apply to all the work. Moreover, the realism of some work was quite fundamentally opposed to the realism of other work. It was contradictory, and I didn't really feel these problems were addressed.

4. In general: the autonomy or relative autonomy of art; the high level of self-consciousness in dealing with representation, illusion, surface flatness etc. In particular: the idea of abstraction, the monochrome, the shaped canvas even, and the uncertain division between painting and sculpture - particularly as these themes developed during the sixties.

The question was, how could I refer to that work without just mimicking it? In terms of a kind of post-modern quotation, its much easier to stick scare quotes around a figurative painting - by turning it upside down or whatever - but how can you quote a monochrome without it just being another monochrome, or a bad monochrome? Certain kinds of abstract art, particularly the non-gestural kinds, seem harder to ironise. OK Art and Language ironised Pollock and abstract gesture painting (by including rogue faces, so to speak), but how do you ironise a completely flat canvas (without introducing some kind of furtive figuration, a la Peter Halley)? This question was soon taken over by another: what in any case would be achieved by this ironisation?

A lot of ironic post-modernism has a kind of smart-arsed knowing better look about it. As I understand it, irony is not about knowing better: it is about deep uncertainty, profound doubt. For me the best ironists are Marx, Nietzsche, William Blake and Joseph Conrad, and they were Modernists, in a way, to a man. Post-modernism hasn't increased or reintroduced irony, it has trivialised it. Irony is about life and death; its about the struggle with our dark hearts; its not a means for avoiding such embarrassing issues. I wouldn't call my work ironic now, at least not in the sense in which the term has been used over the last decade or so.

The thinking, very simply, behind the frame based works was along these lines: Since Duchamp and Conceptual Art it has become largely accepted that art is defined not so much by some intrinsic essence but by more contingent forces - by how it is framed. Museums, galleries, magazine features, academic theses, etc, etc, all participate in the framing-effect of art. Derrida says something similar in his origin-and-supplement discussion about pictures and frames. I thought I'd take that idea very literally, absurdly literally, and make the frame into the work rather than the surround of the work. That was the starting point; the practical work involved sorting out on a trial and error basis how to do that. I didn't want to have a series of empty frames on the wall - that would look too smart-arsed and conceptual for words. I started to mutilate the rectangle - dividing, stretching, multiplying, and most recently cutting into the conventional frame-shape. Most of this was based on drawing, and the result was a kind of shaped canvas, not painting but not quite sculpture either.

I see all my work as abstract but this is not to say the work is without reference or some sense of meaning.

5. I think anyone who is a critic or a curator rather than a historian tends to see art in the studio. If you go into a studio you have a rather different relationship with art than when you see it in a museum. If you are writing criticism you are always faced with the question 'Is it any good?' or 'Why do

I like this one better than that one?' You often 'know' why long before you can say why. That order of experience is important.

6. Perhaps one of the reasons Greenberg is so reviled by art historians is that he was a critic, and worse than that, a good one.

Every artist knows some of his or her work is better than other. Not that it deals with ideas more cleverly, but that it looks better - it hangs on the wall better or sits on the floor better. Better is a relative term; in this case it means relative to other work lying around the studio. Everyone has a duty to beware of their good taste, but that doesn't mean you can avoid questions of taste. I think questions of the aesthetic are autonomous from intellectual or moral questions. What has tended to happen both in conservative anti-modernism and in post-modernism is some confusion of ethics and aesthetics. Moralistic art is always sentimental, or worse. I think the world is more interesting if you keep morals out of art - it places more demands on your imagination.

7. I don't think anyone believes in the 'innocent eye' these days. Looking is framed by knowledge, expectations, prejudice and habit just like everything else we do. We can't really be disinterested, but I don't see that is a reason not to try to detach ourselves from our interests, or to imagine what it might be like.

You go and look at any art as well informed as you can be. Art after all is a highly specialised activity. What you look out for is work that connects with the tradition of art in some way but at the same time breaks with that tradition, re-invents it or does something with it that you hadn't expected. You have to be open to having your expectations confounded and nobody is very good at that. That must involve being open to the idea of something having some kind of significance without being able to explain what that significance is. I think people call that intuition.

8. Fry and Bell knew they were talking to people of their class and education. But they also allowed, in theory at least, for a response which wasn't merely educated.

9. 'Ordinary people' don't exist. 'The man in the street' is a fiction made up by administrators and politicians who then claim to speak in their interests. There is almost nothing outside specialisation in our culture. 'Elitism' incidentally is also one of those words used as much in Left rhetoric as by the Right when it comes to damning Modernism.

10. Fuller was one of the most elitist of critics because he never offered an argument. His writing is just a series of would-be lofty pronouncements said on behalf of 'ordinary people'. One thing you couldn't fault about Greenberg was that he always tried to back up his judgements with argument. If you offer some sort of explanation I can't see how that is elitist.

11. Although Fuller claimed deep involvement in the art he promoted, most of the time it was just illustration. He had line about the Britishness of British art and he just slotted in what could be made to fit the theory. There was no point in complaining about this or that illustration; the really repellent thing was the basic idea about Little Englander art.

The parallels with Thatcherism are obvious. The similarities extended to adopting the radical rhetoric of the and turning it entirely against itself in support of some deeply reactionary conservative position.

But I must say the rise of Modern Painters was in one sense rather enjoyable in that it provided a focus. I loved going out and getting my copy and thinking, 'Great, there's the enemy, let's have a go at it'. It led to a good inter-change of texts between a few people.

I wish Artscribe had taken this on explicitly. If there had been an editorial in the magazine stating a commitment to internationalism and cosmopolitanism, in explicit opposition to Modern Painters, I think there could have been quite a good set-to. But that never happened.

12. As far as I recall it started as a student magazine. When I was an art student in Nottingham these couple of lads came along with this idea for a magazine - A3 format, black-and-white, newspaper-type format. It then became a vehicle for a group of London-based abstract painters. When Matt Collings came along with these ideas about recent American and German art a lot of the English painters felt rather disenfranchised.

By the late eighties Artscribe began to bother me. Matt Collings had been replaced by Stuart Morgan as editor who was more concerned with a kind of ethereal, romantic, enigmatic art. It wasn't that Modern Painters had one but that the battle lines had dissolved. The moment had passed, sadly.

13. Yes, Modern Painters fitted the culture of Thatcherism like a glove. That had to be resisted, and for a while a few of us enjoyed this. I think things could have been different if Artscribe had taken the bait. It could have brought in more interesting people from the Left to raise the level of debate about contemporary art... although a lot of people from the

Left write very badly about art. No one has a privileged entry into discussion about art by virtue of their political position. As I've said, Left and Right come up with the same arguments half the time. Nor do I think artists have a privileged entry into political debate.

14. I don't accept the argument that Modernism is criminally eurocentric. I take 'eurocentric' to mean the assumption, conscious or otherwise, that what other cultures have produced is inherently less valuable than the products of European culture, and that any involvement with those cultures on the part of Europeans is bound to be hegemonic. Thus when Picasso made use of Iberian masks in his work it is a form of 'cultural imperialism'. It seems to me far more interesting and far less finger-wagging to suggest that European artists were desperately looking for a way out from under the dead weight of a moribund academicism, and that this led to them looking outside the European tradition in order to revivify their art. I don't see that this does violence to those other traditions.

15. Rasheed Araeen is an artist. Artists make art. Art does not change the world. If I saw it as my principal aim to promote or institute political change, I would not choose art as my main weapon. I agree with Don Judd who said: 'Sure, artists should organise against US operations in Nicaragua, just as dentists should'. People have a responsibility as citizens to keep an eye on governments; their responsibility as artists is elsewhere.

16. I think art can help to resist 'dominant values', but in a quiet and philosophical rather than overtly political way.

I am involved in art not because I think it can change the world but perhaps because art represents one of the few places where there is still space to think and reflect. There is room for the imagination, but it is always under threat.

The art that interests me enables me to sustain a conversation with a few people, and that's essential. If that sounds rather limited, well, I would say that the recognition of one's limitations is also a condition of realism. Perhaps art has more to contribute to our psychological selves than our overtly political selves.

17. They are in some way fundamental to my conception of art. Insofar as abstraction is so unfashionable at the moment you begin to wonder if this is King Canutism. Internationalism is fundamental to my sense of my place in the world, such as I have one.

18. The whole century has been dominated by the contrary pulls of nationalism and internationalism. At any one time these two poles of the cultural magnet have different prominence in different places. 'Internationalism' is used in this country as a term of abuse, and not only by Tories. I see myself more as European and not at all as British. 'Culture' has become a dirty word here. Instead of a Ministry of Culture, we have a Ministry of Heritage. That speaks volumes. We don't have a proper museum of modern art, we have a museum of British Art. Dear god...

Rasheed Araeen

120 GREENCROFT GARDENS • LONDON NW6 3PJ

Tel/Fax 071-372 0826

22. 2. 1995

Dear David

Thanks for sending me the transcript of our conversation. It does represent my views, but the language is very "jumpy" and sentences don't flow into each other logically. However, I can do nothing at the moment - I have no time to re-write the whole thing. If you are using this transcript for your sake, it's okay. But please do not quote me from this text for any publication. For ^{my} more accurate views in this respect, please refer to the chapter: "Postcolonial Artists and the Establishment" in Cultural Politics: Class, Race & the Postmodern World by Glenn Feldon/Chris Weedon, published by Blackwell.

Enclosed here is a copy of my interview published recently in Art & Pacific Asia. I hope it will be of some help -

Best wishes

Rasheed

Transcript of a taped conversation with Rasheed Araeen
4th February, 1995.

DM The Royal Academy exhibition in 1987 (*British Art in the 20th Century*) produced a very sanitised version of modern art. To what extent did your exhibition in 1990 (*The Other Story*) represent the intervention of race or ethnicity in the debate over modernism and Britishness?

RA I agree it was an extremely sanitised version of British art, not only from our point of view. (When I say 'our' I mean those considered to be 'the Others', not indigenous British) ... I was surprised there was no place for artists like Kenneth and Mary Martin, and Anthony Hill ...

... By 1987 the whole issue of what was meant by British art had been raised. The issue was ~~presented~~^{about} the limited perception of what British art is. Fair enough what happened in Britain before 1935, or maybe we can take its starting point in 1927, when the first artists from the ex-colonies arrived here with ambition and aspiration and hoped to be part of the mainstream of modernism, (like de Souza). This only happened after the process of post-colonialism ... One could no longer see British art in terms of the colonial paradigm. Unfortunately after all these years we are still trapped in that paradigm. We still don't see non-European artists as part of British art. We still see them as marginal. We are quite happy to support them. We are quite happy to promote them, but we always do that on the basis that they need our help, they need our benevolence. We keep them at the margins. They do not enter the discourse.

DM How do you explain the staging of *The Other Story* at a time when there was a retrenchment of conservative and nationalist values?

RA That was a paradox. That can be explained in terms of political expediency on the part of the system ... it was in 1985-6 that things began to change; what we call the ~~post~~-post- GLC period. I disagreed with the GLC's perception of art: it was very populist and very limited. And their attitude to non-white artists was no different from that of the establishment. It was more benevolent, but they never got into the structural and conceptual issues and problems they faced. It did have some impact. It did publicise some issues. It happened at a time when central government was very concerned about the position of the 'ethnic minorities'. (I do not use this term myself) ... I think it was Lord Scarman who said that one of the reasons for the riots was black alienation - the black people did not have enough resources to express themselves. This was taken up and the Arts Council was given very specific instructions to spend 4% of their budget on such things ...

DM Did you see this as a strategy to incorporate 'The Other'?

RA Their policy still remained to treat Asian and African artists as something very

different and separate from the mainstream British culture. Up to this day their policy remains the same. At the same time they recognised they ought to be given a proportion of the public funding to do whatever they wanted to do. There are a lot of people in the Asian and Black community who believe that their existence is very much tied up with their own culture, and their cultural practice should be very much part of that culture. Their perception is not very critical. So they can be appropriated and made part of the establishment, and this is how they set up the whole cultural diversity programme.

At the same time there were individuals who responded to our demand that we should do something very different. My project (*The Other Story*) was conceived sometime in the late seventies. The whole thing came from the Hayward Gallery Annual show of 1978 when it was curated by four women. ... I found the show encouraging because it had come out of the whole women's movement, and I identified myself with that movement. But it was also sad because it did not include any non-European, non-white artists ... They still remained trapped within their own Eurocentric perception. So I leafleted them. As a result I started thinking ...

... The show (*The Other Story*) was nothing to do with ethnicity, nothing to do with Black Art. It was the kind of gap left by the Royal Academy show (1987) that we wanted to fill.

DM What do you mean when you say it was nothing to do with ethnicity?

RA The questions of ethnicity, of ethnic identity were not the issues of the fifties and sixties. Those artists who came from Africa and ^{Asia} ~~India~~ and the Caribbean - their approach to art was no different from British artists. They wanted to be modern artists. They wanted to deal with the problems and issues that were inherent in modernism - what one is required to do when one wants to be part of that evolutionary process ... Of course the question of ethnicity comes into this ... Once they arrived here they found frustration because the expectation from them by the society was very different. They were only accepted on certain terms rather than being allowed to engage with, or expand, the terms of modernism ...

... Artists have to negotiate with the dominant system ... If the expectation from the system is that this is the framework from within which you can express yourself then artists do sometimes oblige. So in the work of Chandra and de Souza the question of ethnicity did enter but it was never central ... I am not trying to deny the concept of ethnicity ... but one of the concerns of modernism was to suppress one's identity... to escape from one's own culture...

DM One of the responses to *The Other Story* was to regard you and other similar artists as an 'elite black intelligentsia' who would not reach the masses. There was more chance of effecting change, it was said, through rap or 'street' culture.

- RA That was rubbish ... The general problem is that there was a reluctance on the part of white art historians to write. So they chased some black writers, but we don't have black art historians - that's part of the problem. There may be one or two but they were not visible. So they picked up any writer, any journalist to review the show. If you're not involved as an art critic or art historian in that sort of discourse you cannot understand the specificity of the discourse - what it is trying to achieve ... I think the reference about the music was totally irrelevant. You have to struggle with the same discourse. It's not a question of changing the whole society, it's a question of changing the framework of the discourse, and you cannot do it by bringing the music in ...
- DM In a sense you can sustain the argument that any artist engaged with modernism, white or black, is 'elitist'. That is, it is art that is only going to appeal to a minority of people. Do you accept that you as an artist will only be understood by an elite few?
- RA As a general statement this is true. But we cannot draw a boundary around who this elite should be; it doesn't have to be a privileged class. It is a question of knowledge, of one's interests. People from the working class can be interested in modernism. If you think of white British artists like Henry Moore or David Hockney they come from the working class.
- DM One of the works from your recent exhibition *Oh Dear, Oh Dear What a Mess You Have Made!*, (1994) had references to Pollock. In a way you would have to be an informed spectator before you could understand the work.
- RA We are talking about discourse, about ^{a particular} ~~practical~~ discipline. The working class is not informed but can still look at the work at a different level. You can look at the work and like it; it can attract you. As far as the penetration of the work at a critical level, you have to be informed. I wouldn't say the work of art functions only at one level.
- DM Would you agree that once your work has been 'deciphered' there is still an aesthetic remainder that is attractive at a more immediate level?
- RA I am a sensualist ... The denial of sensuality was very much a criticism of American society ... I think there was some kind of fear of sensuality.
- DM Referring again to *Oh Dear, Oh Dear...*, how did you know when it was finished? I am thinking of the point when that degree of sensuality you talk about had been reached.
- RA It was very difficult. I am familiar with Pollock's work, but when I tried to think about it I could only remember his process - I couldn't really imagine his work. It was very difficult - I struggled for a whole day on the panels. I can't answer the question why I stopped. Maybe it was my own aesthetic, not Jackson Pollocks. It just looked good. There was no attempt to compare it with Pollock's work.

DM How do you situate your work in terms of what is now commonly known as 'post-modernism'?

RA I was never interested in post-modernism because my approach has never been theoretical. I don't read much about it. I began to develop those things before the French theory became very popular here - trying to mix things together, recycling my earlier work, ironic references. I began to do this in the 70s.

I am not really comfortable with post-modern theories ... It is a denial of authorship and history. For us who have been denied that position in the historical process authorship and history are important. The identity of the European male has already been established and already has authority ... It is taken for granted - even when you say there is no authorship. But that cannot be applied to the non-European. We have to assert our authorship. That is my main dispute with post-modernism.

DM How do you feel about the form of irony used by post-modernists?

RA What seems to be irony is not irony. Irony can be a tool of critical discourse. But it is a question of what you are being ironic about. If you are ironic about everything you become a cynic. I think we have to make this distinction.

DM How do you see your work in the context of 'Realism'? (Thinking of your contribution to the exhibition *Approaches to Realism* curated by John Roberts in 1990.)

RA I think John meant 'realism' in terms of one's experience of reality rather than how it is perceived by the eye ...

DM There was another exhibition at the time purporting to be about 'realism'. It was Brandon Taylor's show *Critical Approaches to Realism*. Sonia Boyce appeared in both. How do you see your work in relation to her and to other 'realist' artists such as Keith Piper?

RA I have a lot of respect for Keith and Sonia, but I have problems with ^{ethi} their work. I see it as very traditional. Very much to do with the idea of figuration that came from the Royal College ... If you take the emergence of figuration in India during the seventies, they all come from the Royal College: from Kitaj and Hockney. But I suppose that was the initial period of Sonia Boyce's work. She was occupied with certain issues of identity as a black woman ... Keith is very talented ... but somehow he is caught up in issues that are very important, but they tend to be sentimental - focussing on the police as a target, for example. It is not a very useful way of dealing with repression. Police are a functionary of the institution, not the institution itself ... Keith's work is also obsessed with the whole issue of slavery, which I think is very useful to raise. But the problem again is one of sentiment.

Maybe it is not an occasion for me to comment on the work of these artists.

You asked me how I see them in the context of my work. I don't know. I just think they are different artists ... I have empathy with them ... but I think they are still caught up in the initial rhetoric ... I think there is a problem when art begins to involve guilt and sentiment.

DM Do you feel empathy with artists such as *Art and Language*?

RA Initial period of *Art and Language* yes, but I think they have become cynical ... I don't know. But maybe I'm wrong. It's a very subtle cynicism. They are very clever.

DM To what extent do think modernism provides you with the resources to intervene into the discourses of contemporary art?

RA I've passed through many phases. I think the basic issue of how to intervene, how to rupture the purity of modernism for me is still very important. When I say purity, the notion of purity I am referring to is very much to do with the identity of the white man. I think this is something that has to be constantly questioned. I don't think post-modernism provides enough resources for us to question that. It can only provide an alternative space ...

... My work is still very much tied to my earlier practice. I still use the grid system which was initially a response to the modernist sculpture of Anthony Caro, but I have been constantly denied that relationship ... You cannot understand my present work, even if it looks post-modernist, without reference to that. Those issues of authorship are still there. You cannot look at my work just in terms of cultural identity or post-modernity ...

DM During the eighties conservatism reasserted itself. How can you sustain a critical practice in these very oppressive conditions?

RA ... You face a heavy responsibility to be critical. You must respond to these conditions ...

DM Do you feel that your art will change anything?

RA It is not up to me to say ... It's my profession. I can't do anything else ... It may change people's perception. It may help them to abandon the idea of 'the Other'. If so, then maybe I have made a worthwhile contribution. The idea of 'the Other' is still firmly entrenched in Eurocentric discourse, and has now been taken up by post-colonial discourse.

DM Do you see modernism as having plundered other cultures?

RA It wasn't modernism that plundered other cultures, it was colonialism that did that. Modernism was very much part of the colonial agenda. I don't blame Picasso. He was not the culprit. If I was in his place I would likely have done the same thing.

- DM How do you see your work developing in the future?
- RA I want to work more around the notion of absurdity and the power of the media. For me TV is a continuation of western discourse. From the whole classical period of painting, it entered into photography and film and ends in TV.
- DM Although you are dealing with issues that involve almost everybody, only relatively few people will see your work, because not many go to art galleries. Does this concern you?
- RA I don't frequently show work. If I had my work shown in a larger gallery more people would go there. I am very grateful to David Thorp who put on this most recent exhibition (at the South London Gallery). The trouble is that it is a marginal place, and a marginal artist showing in a marginal place doesn't do much good. I was ignored by the media. Nobody wrote anything about it.
- DM Do the Tate Gallery own any of your work?
- RA No ... but it's their problem not mine. They are not denying me my presence there, they are denying the importance of the British culture to minimalism. They keep on sticking to the American theory that it was an American phenomena. How could it be an American phenomena? Any innovation that forms an epistemological break in art or science or mathematics is responded to globally. My response to modern sculpture was very much the same as theirs. So why should it be an American phenomena?
- DM Your work has been referred to as derivative.
- RA Peter Fuller accused me of starting my work by imitating Anthony Caro. Can you take anybody seriously who says such atrocious things? Nobody has taken him to task for that ...
- ... Art doesn't fall from the sky. We are all influenced by other work. It should not be confused with derivation.
- DM The implication is that you should be looking at your own culture, not at 'ours'- a matter of possession.
- RA Exactly. The whole paradigm of modernism is synonymous with white identity. It is not the case in science ... Art is tied up with notions of the 'heroic'. Art doesn't have use value, it has exchange value. Science has use value. Art has use value but only after exchange value has been established ...

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